

The Last Drop of Living

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If you chose to do so, you could probably make the case that “going minimal” is an act of selfishness. Particularly, this may be valid if you chose that direction without considering the impact that your arbitrary decision would have on family and friends. I thank my family and friends for accepting my choice of lifestyle, thus preventing me from wearing the brand of “selfish.”

I am extremely fortunate, in that my wife, Janice, has embraced this new way of living enthusiastically, and eagerly has accommodated my quirky habits and values. Without Janice, this journey would have been difficult, if not impossible.

I also am extremely fortunate that I have close friends that, not only understand, but encourage our unusual choices. It is the richness of friendships with people such as Claude and Ginette that makes “going minimal” an experience that we can enjoy to the maximum.

I would like to thank, too, my children – all eight of them – for tolerating their oddball parents. And I hope that, as they travel through the richness that life has to offer, that, someday, they will take the poet’s Road Less Travelled. They deserve all the splendour that unexplored pathways offer.

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THE LAST DROP OF LIVING: AN INTRODUCTION

My wife, through years of having to wring the last morsel of value out of everything during her past life, developed some odd habits. One of my favourites is the way she upturns the milk carton over her cup, and lets the last drops fall into the glass. It doesn't cost her any extra effort or time, and she recovers, at best, a teaspoon or so. But it illustrates her necessary frugality. She gets every last drop.

Minimalism should be that way. I'm not advocating that you have to resort to desperate measures in order to meet everyday living essential needs. Quite the contrary: you should be wringing every morsel of enjoyment out of each minute of life, regardless of whether it is a \$200,000 half-year cruise around the world or an hour spent watching an ant drag a crumb of food fifty feet, by itself.

Conventional minimalists love to self-deprecate. "Look at how little I have. Look at how miserably destitute I am. Isn't it great?"

No, it's not. It isn't vigorous. It isn't energetic. It is existence, nothing more.

Dynamic minimalism offers more life than materialistic living. It is a style of vitality that says, "I can interact and savour all that the world has to offer, without leaving a legacy of leftovers."

The concept is more than easy talk. It is an easy

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walk.

I confess that I am a very recent convert to minimalism. Indeed, it was a close friend who pointed out to me, less than a decade ago, that I was a minimalist. Until that time, I was merely parsimonious. Once I was provided with a label, and understood all that it entailed, I, at every opportunity, bragged about living a minimalistic lifestyle. I didn't change anything I was doing, or how I was living. I just had a label!

At the time of my revelation, I lived in a 64-square foot cabin, with nothing but a single bed, a 30-liter storage tub that doubled as a table, a small composting toilet and no running water. I showered outside, using a camp solar shower (even in minus 30C temperatures). I heated water and cooked on a Coleman camp stove and heated my cabin using water-filled piping from a wood fire pit. My clothes were hung on a broken rake handle over the foot of my bed. When I could, I wild-harvested cattails, rosehips, spruce buds and other available foods in the wild.

In my working life, though, I developed multi-million dollar housing projects, advanced high-speed Internet infrastructure and a variety of biofuels initiatives. None of my clients knew of my secret life. Can you imagine how low their confidence in my abilities would have sunk had they known how I lived in my private existence?

That world of extreme rejection of material goods certainly is not for everyone, and it is an extremely

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poor example of minimal living. I thrived on it. My wife, when we married in 2005, would not have been able to survive the experience.

There are many of us who approach such novel concepts with the philosophy of a crash-dieter. Throw everything away, sleep on the floor, gnaw on discarded soup bones, and wear clothes into tatters. Within days, weeks or months, the enthusiasm for the fad wanes, and the commitment to change dissipates.

Over the years, I have devoured numerous books, articles and online data on conservation concepts, environmentalism, materialism versus minimalism and related ideas. There are two universal themes behind each of these sources of information: cutting back and denial of luxury. A related, but socially disdained “ism” that should accompany the primary two concepts is survivalism. Each – minimalism, environmentalism and survivalism – have elements in common.

Survivalism has been burdened with the image of gun-toting anti-establishment, camouflage clothing wearing radicals that seek to tear down government for their own ends.

Environmentalism, often paralleled with conservationism, has a chic cross to bear – that of groups of radical granola-munchers who want all of us to live off nuts and berries and turn our homes into havens for wild animals while we trade our cars for bicycles for the hundred-mile commute to work.

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Minimalists have the lightest burden of distorted imagery to carry: starving artists and left-wing nuts who want to throw everything away in favour of living in a Spartan studio apartment, with a board for a bed, while eating only the cheapest foods.

None of these are appealing options to the majority of people.

But what do the three “isms” have in common?

Each of the three advocates that we should cut back on our reliance on many of the contemporary frills, and eschew the race for the biggest pile of modern-day junk.

There are polarized points of view in each of these three camps. Absolutely no government (or corporate) intervention, and a radical libertarian vision, with individual rights trumping any and all collective rights and responsibilities. Absolutely zero carbon footprint, and a goal of living less off of the environment than even wild animals. Absolute self-denial, and no ownership of any material goods. Strangely, there are numerous people in each sector that embrace those far-out philosophies.

There are, more commonly, moderates in the environmental and minimal philosophical sectors.

It would be a simple matter to approach this guide by taking the radical approach to minimalism. It is the one most frequently sought, and the one least frequently achieved. But it is the one that most neophytes aspire towards, when they make the choice to redirect their lives. I have lived that life,

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by choice, and enjoyed it. However, it was not the self-denial that I enjoyed. Rather, it was the gains I made when I chose to eliminate reliance on material success.

While I was abandoning my ties to the objects that define conventional success, such as big homes, fancy vehicles and expensive food and clothing, I was embracing what my newly discovered surplus finances could do.

At one point, I was owed more than eight month's income by my clients. It was not that they were delinquent, since in two instances, I was the one responsible for issuing cheques to me! No, it was simply that I needed the cash flow less than my clients (a couple of not-for-profit community groups) did. If I didn't need it, why should I grab it?

On two occasions, I came across two friends with significant financial needs. With the reserve that I was not using, I was able to provide relief for their problems.

Throughout a ten-year period, I had no bank account, other than a business account that I used to enable the cashing of my earnings. There was never any money in those accounts, other than \$5 or \$10. I had no need of complex transactions, used no charge cards, and owed no debts, so why would I need an active account? (In reality, carrying only cash did present a number of problems. These will be discussed later).

I was also lucky when it came to clothes. In my

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rural business world, I seldom needed a suit, so I owned only one, and one dress shirt. That certainly aided my minimalist approach.

Often, I was mocked, light-heartedly, by country friends, because I drove a 2000 Toyota Echo, while they all drove huge trucks. One of my buddies regularly offered to toss the Echo into the box of his truck, so he could use it as a “spare” if his truck broke down. Was I being a typical granola-munching eco-freak? Not likely. That Echo got 53 mpg, was still running perfectly, with 470,000 km on its odometer, when I passed it on to my son, and it got me everywhere that I needed to go. I didn’t need anything larger, since I was single at that time and my kids were all grown and long-since moved away.

Were my country friends being self-indulgent, with their gas-guzzling trucks? For the most part, no, since those trucks were essential to their farming jobs.

Just that one example – subcompact versus big truck – indicates how subjectively we should approach the idea of minimalism. Minimalism needs to be defined by the circumstance, if it needs to be defined, at all.

It is the need to define these “isms” that creates the greatest barriers to understanding and adopting the lifestyles that they involve. It is the desire to provide a clinical, concise definition that pigeonholes the characteristics of these ways of living, and limits understanding.

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I have a name for my lifestyle, but it is not one that I chose. It is one that I was given. I have an understanding of what I view as a minimalistic lifestyle, but it is subjective, and not bound by ideology.

If you are looking for a rigid rulebook for living the minimalistic lifestyle, this is not the book for you. But if you are looking for a way to get the most out of life, while consuming the least, I may be able to help. I have one philosophy that I apply to this chosen way of living: wring every drop out of living. I intend to show you how I have done so, and share a few ideas that others have embraced. Then, you can choose to adopt, or adapt these concepts. It is your choice.

Ironically, it is my wife who is largely responsible for the intensity with which I now live my minimalist life. When we married in 2005, she lived in a five-bedroom middle class home on a double lot in the suburbs and drove two vehicles. By the end of the second year, there were six cars in the household. Within three years, we had downsized to a compact, old 3-bedroom home in a rebuilding area of the city centre. Within four years, we had downsized again, to a one-bedroom apartment and one car. At the beginning of the fifth year together, we had moved to acreage in a relatively remote rural community and built a yurt – a tent-like structure with one room -- off the grid entirely. This evolution came at my wife's suggestion!

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It is equally ironic that, as we downsized our houses, we increased our assets. Each renovation and sale put money into savings, while simultaneously cutting living expenses. Our monthly budget decreased from over \$3,500 per month to under \$600. By disposing of the conventional sedans that she owned and purchasing a hybrid Prius, we cut repair bills and insurance costs, reduced operating expenses such as fuel, and increased our comfort while travelling. Instead of purchasing a vacation home in the southern USA, we opted for a low-cost timeshare that allowed us to use “last call” vacations for less than \$40 per night.

Our decreased expenses allowed Janice to retire from full-time employment and take on casual work, which, in turn, decreased travel and incidental employment costs. We now spend our summers from late April to late November living in an idyllic country environment near the lake, working no more than three shifts per week. Our winters are spent in various areas of the southern USA and Latin America, for less than the cost of an apartment in our home city. Yet, our physical assets (other than money) are less than \$50,000, and we own a no-bedroom (the yurt is all one room) home.

It is difficult to imagine the immense reduction in stress that one feels when there is no millstone holding you back from doing what you want with your life, and enjoying every moment. It is likely

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the objective of almost every working person in North America to reduce stress levels, enjoy the freedom of choice, be debt free, and be able to aspire to be and do what you always dreamed of being and doing. Our minimalist lifestyle has afforded us that opportunity.

Moving into a more minimal lifestyle should not be undertaken like a crash diet, however. Few crash diets work, and before long, the dieter returns to overeating with a vengeance. Crash diets, intrinsically, require that you relinquish the things that you enjoy the most. That is not the purpose of becoming a minimalist, in my opinion. The purpose should be to be able to enjoy less, more. To do so, approach the new lifestyle in a stepwise manner, like a swimmer testing the icy waters of Lake Michigan in October.

These steps are:

- » Know before you go: Inventory your life, your assets, your priorities.
- » Head & heart conditioning: Prepare yourself mentally & emotionally.
- » Choose your own direction: Identify what is important to you
- » Always be prepared: Identify fallback (emergency) items
- » Have a soft place to land: Identify items & emotions that are based on nostalgia & memories
- » Put your feet up: What you do for entertainment, and what you need for it
- » Operate with double duty assets, half the cash:

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Identify multi-purpose items

» Tupence, cautiously, frugally invested in the bank: Know economical from expensive.

» Mentally de-clutter before materially de-cluttering.

» Condition the pack rat: Reorganize before de-cluttering

» Any friend of mine ...: Network of associates reorientation

» One part of your life, one activity, one room at a time.

» Monitor and measure

» SpongeBob's philosophy — soak it up.

» Steer clear of the pulpit.

Many of the points seem outrageously obvious. But, like trying to put on your underwear after you have buckled your pants and laced your boots, sequence and attention to the little things are vital if you want to sustain and maintain your new approach to life.

I will deal with each of the steps in the following chapters. Included in this guide are chapters on wildcrafting (the practice of harvesting & using plants and materials found in the wild), building a yurt, energy simplicity, eco-friendly ideas, barebones business ideas and sustainability. Not all of the ideas are palatable, for even the most dedicated minimalist. Pick and choose, as if you were selecting fruit at an open-air market. If you have ideas or suggestions for me, or for others, email me at bizdynamics1@gmail.com or visit our

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blog at <http://leanandgreenliving.blogspot.com>.
In the meantime, enjoy this book, and use it wisely!

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LIVING GREEN AND LEAN

Google “minimalistic lifestyle” and every one but three of the first 80 websites focuses on getting rid of stuff you own or rejecting any form of ownership. Both concepts are ridiculously simplistic, and, unfortunately, completely unrealistic. It is the realm of starving artists and struggling students.

Perhaps the term “minimalism” leads us into an overly basic view of living minimally. And the term evokes different ideas for different people. Ask an environmentalist, and your response probably will focus on cutting back on non-renewable consumption. Ask a survivalist, and expect to hear how “going minimal” means eschewing government, big business and big-city lifestyles. Ask a young person and money, furniture and belongings will be the focal points. For an entrepreneur, it will mean “trimming the fat” from operations.

This bias of interpretation comes from the subjective perception of “doing without.” Back in 1984, Canadian Prime Minister John Turner bragged about he had grown up in relative hardship. Apparently, the house staff had been let go due to hard times when he was a child! Not to be outdone, his opponent, future Prime Minister Brian Mulroney bemoaned his own hardships – a corporate lawyer with an affluent background! How many millions of Canadians wished they

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could have faced the same tough times. Minimalist lifestyles could more simply be viewed as living “green and lean.” But that catchall phrase misses a basic human characteristic. Appreciation of beauty is innate, and may be one of the reasons we adorn our homes and ourselves. So we need to extend the quotations to include the word “living.” Living is not existing, subsisting, or depriving oneself. So, to be minimalistic, one must appreciate living, and learn to appreciate beauty wherever it exists.

Beauty may come from a newly opened flower, or a panoramic view of the wilderness. It may be found in the innovative scribbling of a graffiti tagger. It may be found in the dyed purple hair of a rebelling teenager, or the concentric, expanding circles from a rock tossed on the water. However, it should not come from a need to accumulate, to own bigger, to climb over others, etc. True beauty, for a minimalist, is found in unique and exciting places, and there is no need to own beauty. Instead, beauty needs to be appreciated, where and when found.

Understanding and framing the concept of minimalism in relation to your own lifestyle and needs is essential to being able to adopt that “living green and lean” philosophy. Once you are able to identify your concept of beauty and comfort, once you prioritize your needs versus your wants, and once you realize that being minimalist is less realistic than going minimalist,

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you have taken the first step to going lean and green. After all, like life itself, a lifestyle is a journey, evolving, adapting and embracing new ways & days.

But you still have to live in the everyday world, surrounded by people with differing priorities and beliefs from yours. Let's start the journey toward a simpler life by understanding ourselves, and how we are willing to be viewed.

Almost without exception, ask someone to describe a minimalist lifestyle, and you will get "Getting rid of everything you own and living without much of anything."

That's not minimalism. In polite circles, that's a Spartan lifestyle. For those of us prone to being too blunt, that's dumpster thinking. Life in a cardboard box.

Minimalist art certainly is not about eliminating everything. It is about simplifying background noise to allow viewers to focus on the simple, obvious item in front of them. It is about eliminating the unnecessary. Minimalist living should be the same. The public image requires re-branding to drag the lifestyle from obscurity to avante garde.

Today's environmentalists are on the cusp of minimalism. Their public persona is that of caring for the world around us, of reducing our eco-footprint, of living clean, and independent of the noise of pollution. How is that different from minimalism?

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One of the major impediments to large-scale embrace of the minimalist approach is the people with whom the concept is identified: radical artists, reactionaries and starving, idealistic youth. Environmentalists, on the other hand, are perceived as well-educated, somewhat affluent and insightful.

To explain to an acquaintance that you are a minimalist, you invite their view of you as living on the cusp of poverty. In my world, I deal with a variety of bureaucrats, a wealth of money-handlers, and an army of potential entrepreneurs who are looking to score their millions. To explain to them that I live a minimalist life would immediately cause them to revisit their beliefs in my competence as a business developer. I know. I've done it, and am not likely to repeat that error! I have compensated. When I leave work, none of my clients are invited into my personal life. I go home to my barebones home, in my ultra-economical Echo, and change into my \$5 tee-shirt and \$16 jeans. In the morning, I climb into my suit, pick up my Blackberry and laptop, and rejoin the "normal" world. Am I comfortable with this compromise? Not really. But the public image of minimalism currently does not allow for coming out of the minimalist closet.

While my approach may seem hypocritical, it is essential to survival.

When one adopts a divergent approach to anything, and is called to defend it, a person

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almost always takes one of three tacts: deny passively, adapt, or defend aggressively. As a solid environmentalist, I support forest conservation. I do not support the approach of radicals who pound spikes into trees to thwart chainsaws. As a solid believer in small business, I do not support the heavy-handed irresponsibility of multinationals. I also do not support those protesters who inflict violence and destruction on innocent businesses at the G-9 conferences. Unfortunately, those extreme approaches are the very visible reactions by people who are challenged to defend their divergent views, and are unwilling to passively accept any alternative. Minimalists tend to overreact. (That comment is sure to get a rise out of those readers who choose the more divergent approach to the concept, by divesting themselves of every piece of comfort and every stick of worldly possessions). However, what I mean by the comment is that we tend to want to show our dedication to the philosophy by throwing away everything, and every link to conventional lifestyles.

A more moderate approach is much more successful if change is to be sustained. Obviously, I now have both a barebones wardrobe, and the more worldly one. My one suit and one dress shirt are more than adequate to “put on the Ritz” when needed. On out-of-town business calls, I rent the occasional mid-level intermediate sedan. I own technology, but I no longer subscribe to basic

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cable (news is essential; news channels are not!). I largely “live off the land,” but bring along store-bought (instead of homemade) wines when I socialize. The transitions are easy.

For me, the move to minimalism was more abrupt than for most of you, in many ways made out of necessity. Maintaining the lifestyle became a choice. But for most, the move to minimalism should be made gradually, partly because of the shock to the system when you first seek out your fine jewellery for that special outing (and it is no longer there) or when the children come crying for the latest designer clothes because their friends are mocking your kids’ perceived poverty. But gradual moves will enable you to integrate your public persona with your private lifestyle, and allow you to be selective in your new minimalistic approach.

Getting rid of everything may give you a momentary feeling of triumph, but climbing into that cardboard box at night is sure to send a feeling of chill down your spine!

To be sure, minimalism needs a new image, but, to paraphrase the old saying, “image-building begins at home.” Get your own head around what minimalism means to you, before you try to convince the outside world of the rightness of your divergent approaches.

What is minimalism and what is not? It is not about using less: it’s about getting more out of everything. It is not about doing without. It’s

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about living with. It's about sustainability & priorities. Minimalism requires more focus on pleasant life experiences, rather than just random acceptance. It is a more active way of living

Recall the last time that you visited the art gallery. Here were all those paintings, pictures and sculptures, displayed on naked walls and on solitary pedestals. No clutter, no distractions. The quality of the paintings was sufficient to focus your attention, and allow you to savour the beauty of each piece, on its own. Many people will spend entire days at a stretch in an art gallery.

How about the last time that you shopped for clothing? Did you notice how the racks were set up with the shortest racks near the aisles, spaced wide apart? As you were drawn inward, the racks got taller, more closely spaced.

Now, think of your visit to a high-end clothing store. While the regular clothing store may have had fifty to one hundred garments on each rack, the high end racks displayed each item with lots of space.

Lastly, consider the bargain shop. Thousands upon thousands of items, crammed into the smallest possible spaces.

Life is like that. The quality moments stand alone, uncluttered and beautiful. Most of life is lived in the bargain shop. The regular clothes draw us in and capture us subtly, while the high end garments appeal to us with their standoffishness.

Going minimal does not simply empty out the

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bargain basement of your life. It clears the residue away, so that you can enjoy the beauty of each moment. A minimal life is an art gallery.

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Taking stock is a pedantic chore, to be sure. It is also more challenging than it appears to be at first blush. But taking stock is essential to the process of moving towards living minimally. Taking stock, too, is more than counting what you have. It is about counting what you want and need, what is important to you, and where you are and are going in your life.

To decide to become a minimalist, and then spring this surprise on your spouse, is more than taxing. It is presumptuous. As eagerly as you may embrace the concept, your family should have input, as they will be impacted severely. As enthusiastically as you may begin the process, without consultation, compromise and coordination, your chosen route will be littered with impediments that could have been avoided or ameliorated.

Consequently, a measured approach to converting from your old way of living to the new, frugal lifestyle is needed. “measured” means more than deliberate and controlled. It means, quite literally, that you must measure where you currently “are at” before you choose where you want to go. Like a store owner counting his stock at year end, you will need to inventory your life, your obligations and your priorities.

Much of our life is built on our image – both our own and others’ image of us. At the beginning of

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this guide, I described the mini-cabin in which I lived, contrasted to the work I did as a housing and community project developer. Whether I wanted or not, the image that I portrayed to the outside world, in that career path, determined, in large measure, my credibility in that community, and my potential success at convincing my clients of my capabilities.

We are, indeed, judged by our cover.

A family member lives an extreme hermit lifestyle. He has never married, lives in a small shack on the old family property, and never socializes. His forays into the public consist of a weekly, extremely brief trip to the neighbourhood grocery store on a Wednesday afternoon. He refuses to answer the door if anyone stops by, and has, so far as I know, not visited with anyone in fourteen years.

His appearance is dishevelled. He wears only a couple of sets of clothes, with all items dyed a dull blue. He shaves infrequently, has a mass of wild hair that is roughly chopped every couple of months and unkempt. His teeth are in desperate need of repair.

This fellow's home is cluttered with vehicle parts, old tools, scraps of this and that. He has lived off less than \$3,000 per year for the last twenty-three years, having "retired" at the age of forty-two.

He does not choose to be a minimalist. He just lives very simply, largely because to do otherwise would require that he return to the work force and

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engage with people. He would rather materially deprive himself than socialize.

This characterization of this senior would lead most readers to belief that he is incapable of human interaction and mentally ill-fitted for life.

That appraisal would be tremendously inaccurate.

He is incredibly intelligent and mechanically skilled. Years ago, he converted a 1964 Vauxhall subcompact car into a fully functioning backhoe and trencher. He has redesigned and machined numerous pieces of equipment to make them more efficient. He not only built a small airplane from scratch, but submitted a correction for the kit package to the manufacturer, for which he was handsomely rewarded. Every calculation of airflow and stress, over every $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of the plane was recalculated, manually, by him.

He also possesses a unique, wry sense of humour and is quite engaging in conversation. He simply fears human contact, for the most part!

Yet, he is stereotyped as “limited” and psychologically troubled. He is judged by what people choose to see, rather than what is underneath.

If you opt for a minimal lifestyle, you, too, will be branded. You need, not only to recognize this fact, but prepare for it in the various alleys and compartments of your life. Image, unfortunately, is important.

Not only do you need to consider how that change of image will impact on you, you must consider

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how it will impact on your family, whether or not they join you on this ride into a new way of approaching life.

Are you prepared to face the branding that will inevitably accompany a dramatic change in the way you live life? Some of the most common labels are “environmentalist,” “granola-muncher,” “eco-freak,” and related tags that identify you as an environmentalist. More likely, you may be branded as “poor,” since the most common identification of a minimalist is one who cannot afford the luxuries of life.

Most damaging, though, is the image that others may have in your business world. It is a reality that those of lower-income status and appearance, those with more modest clothing or inexpensive haircuts, makeup, etc. are often perceived as less capable, and, consequently, less promotable. How will you deal with that brand?

The second part of your self-inventory deals with your current obligations. Those obligations include job, mortgage, financial, family, social and community obligations. The degree to which you will be able to adopt your new way of living life will be determined, in large measure, by those duties.

I was fortunate, on a multitude of fronts, when I embraced minimalism. Being single with grown children, my family obligations were minimal. Had my children been of school age, the intensity with which I approached reducing my clutter of stuff

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and my chaos of life would have been somewhat muted, and adapted to allow for my family to enjoy a more conventional way of living.

I, being self-employed for over 30 years, have enjoyed the luxury of being able to select my client base judiciously. I have also been able to compartmentalize my work from my personal life. Had I been, for example, a professional sales person, I would have been compelled to live up to the image of what one perceives a successful salesperson to be.

When I opted to move into my 64-square-foot cabin in 2000, I was able to sell my lakefront home for a profit, which, in turn, enabled me to become debt-free. With absolutely no overhead, living minimally caused far less stress than if I had been required to maintain a significant debt load.

In Canada (at least, in most provinces), health care comes with no extra cost or premium, other than what is routed through taxation. I was not only fortunate to have been relieved of the burden of worrying about health care premiums, but I did not have to worry about cash reserves in the event that I became ill. Couple that with excellent health, and I was in an ideal position to “go minimal.”

The community and charitable groups to which I belonged were not dependent on the “success image.” In fact, I volunteered with poverty-reduction NPOs, throughout the early 2000s. If, on the other hand, I had been involved with a fine

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arts organization, I, most likely, would have had to maintain the look of affluence.

My position was far more amenable to adopting a less materialistic approach to life than most people's. Nonetheless, none of the above categories of personal or professional obligations should preclude you from embracing this way of life. You, however, may have to make a few sacrifices, or modify your tactics to suit your individual situation. This is the primary reason for conducting the inventory, in the first place.

Being minimal does not mean being broke. Yes, the prevailing stereotype of the radical minimalist is that of the starving student, or the Marxist fanatic, but lack of money and minimal are not synonymous. In fact, the more money you have, the easier it may be to be non-materialistic!

Nonetheless, it is important that you take stock of well, your stock! Knowing your assets includes knowing their worth, as well as their value. The two, I assure you, are not synonymous.

First, let's take a physical count of what you possess. Let's calculate their cash value, less any debts owed on them. That's important to get a snapshot of your finances.

That picture will include an itemization of cash on hand, physical property, savings, retirement funds (accessible and locked-in, private and company), your health and "fringe benefits" coverage, your insurance policies, and so on. Now, calculate what you currently pay out each month, to

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determine the number of months that you could endure, without income. It's not that you will be expected to do so. It is more to give you an idea of the worst-case scenario. By knowing the worst, and factoring in your tolerance level for hardship, you will know how well positioned you are to "do without." That, theoretically, will help to avert stress during the difficult conversion period.

It also will give you an idea of the level of dependence on material assets that you currently experience.

But the primary purpose of conducting an inventory of your assets and debts is not to expound on money management. It is to begin the process of understanding how you can eliminate or defer reliance on much of your "stuff."

A friend of mine inadvertently detoured from his life of material affluence, while working on a biodiesel research project. A farmer, he had been driving a pickup truck for most of his adult life. So did his brother and partner in the farm. The farm corporation also owned a pickup, a tandem and an 18-wheeler. As he understood, the truck was essential. He owned no car.

During the course of the research project, he actually traded in his F250 gasoline-driven truck for an F350 diesel. That truck became his first test vehicle for the hemp biodiesel that we were assessing.

But Paul felt that we needed to test the product on smaller engines, as well. While I conducted tests

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on cleaners, lubricating oils, penetrating oils and so on (using the biodiesel), Paul purchased an older Volkswagen diesel car. Old, and small were two essential factors in the trials. The biodiesel performed remarkably well.

The corollary to the research, however, was that Paul found that he enjoyed the feel, and the lower operating costs of a car, as opposed to his truck. After assessing the true need for a third pickup truck in the farm business, he and his brother decided that it was superfluous. Paul got rid of that truck, and purchased another car, giving the Volkswagen to his mother. He had begun the process of living more minimally!

The point? Often, what we think we need is not really essential, at all.

How, though, do you decide what is needed, and what is not? You have to start by knowing what you have. That is the primary purpose of inventorying your physical assets.

Aside from physical assets, we all have internal “assets.” Those are the things we do well, the subjects that we know about, and the social connections that we have. These are “tradable” assets.

Particularly if we have skills that we can use to generate revenue, we are able to more quickly move into a minimalist mode. One of the most difficult parts of adopting this lifestyle is that, when we hit one of those bumps in the road when our finances are tested, our stress levels increase. It

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is not so much the desire for material things that cause us to revert to the old way of life, but the stress of feeling that we are “trapped” by the reduced resource base on which we rely. If we have marketable skills, we are able to recognize that we have a fallback position in the case of an emergency.

Similarly, social skills enable us to interact and “trade” assets more readily. Avoid the tendency to assume that going minimal requires that you also adopt a more sedentary, isolated lifestyle. The network of friends and associates is more important, and will feel more vibrant, as you focus less on the conventional tools of leisure (television, electronic games, videos, etc.).

It is not unlike giving up smoking. You will, most certainly, feel the cravings for the old ways very soon after relinquishing them. But soon, your tastes will revive, and you will find that you savour human (and non-human!) interactions more than you ever have.

On the more cynical side, those human interactions may offer other advantages, such as being able to borrow items that you may have disposed of, because you used them so infrequently.

In fact, when you conduct a physical inventory of your assets, break down that inventory into categories, including those items that you use less than two or three times each month, those items that can be used for other purposes (such as a

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chest or trunk that could be used as a coffee table, or a coffee pot that could be used for making tea, etc.), those items that are redundant or superfluous, those items that have aesthetic rather than practical purposes, those items that could be converted to another use, and the cash value of each of those items. (The reasons for this breakdown will be made more clear in subsequent chapters).

As you rely on this inventory to phase in your journey into the new way of life, you will discover that there are many less obvious ways that you could further reduce your reliance on material items.

For example, let's look at that step ladder that you have hanging in the garage. Next to it, you have the extension ladder, and the two-rung ladder that you use for reaching items on the top shelf of the cabinets. First, would it not be more efficient to own one ladder that served all purposes? Such multi-function ladders are about double the cost of the extension ladder, but have exceptional lifespans, store more easily than your three single ladders, and offer the additional benefit of being able to be used as scaffolds. Now, instead of every neighbour on the block, or every family member in several households, or every homeowner in your group of friends buying their own ladders, why not approach your collection of colleagues and suggest buying one for the group, with each household using the ladder when

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needed? Costs have gone from \$240 for three ladders to \$200 for one, but it is being shared by 10 homeowners that would have each invested \$100-250 for their own units.

How about that toaster, convection oven, microwave, range and griddle that you own? Would a high-quality convection/microwave oven combination serve your purposes adequately, at a greatly reduced cost?

Examine the efficacy of each item in your stock list, to see which items are being used substantially the same as another item, or which items could be combined with others to provide greater use-per-dollar.

This analysis of benefit per dollar spent is not unlike a return-on-investment analysis for your stocks and savings plans. You may find, for example, that you have invested in the equivalent of a penny stock, buying numerous items that fill limited capacities (e.g. popcorn maker, rice cooker, water cooler, and so on), yet have very limited benefit. On the other hand, some items that have a higher initial cost provide a much greater ROI in the long term. I alluded to this in discussing the purchase of our Prius.

Cost comes into play in another way as well. Many items on your list may have an ongoing debt obligation associated with them as well. Such items as your house (mortgage), motor home, car and so on might have obvious monthly financial commitments. These cannot be disposed of

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readily, and, even if they could, may still leave a residual debt obligation once sold. Others, such as household belongings, may have a credit card debt associated with, but not bound to them. It is the debts that form the burden and impediment to minimizing your assets.

Another consideration that should be reflected in your inventory of assets and liabilities is the impact that the item in question has on each person in your closed network (most often, family members). It may be easy for you to give up the Xbox, but how about your teenage son? “Going minimal” should not be an arbitrary decision, or a narcissistic one. Evaluate each of your assets in terms of its impact on other members of your closed group.

Once you have completed the pedantic chore of itemizing your assets and categorizing them, you will need to review those lists one last time, to determine and establish your priorities.

In order of most frequent limitations on the ability to fully embrace minimalistic living are family commitments, job responsibilities, health obligations, financial commitments, and personal preferences. Within each of these categories are specific priorities.

For instance, your family commitments may entail raising teenage children (who generally are more dependent on image), advanced education needs (computers, Internet, hands-on field research, etc.), taking care of elderly family members (health

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costs, accommodations, time demands, and so on), housing demands (ongoing repairs, expansion plans, redecoration, major renovations, efficiency upgrades, or installation of leisure amenities such as pools, barbeques, etc. for the family to enjoy).

You will need to prioritize and rank the importance (on a variety of fronts) of each of the subcategories, and of the various elements of each subcategory. This is a time-consuming and thought-provoking process. It should not be hurried or approached superficially.

Indeed, I recommend that you create your list and develop your priorities, establishing for each a ranking on a scale of 1-100. Set the list aside, and recalibrate it in a week or so. Consult with the impacted members of your family, and set the revised list aside once again. On the third visit to this list, finalize all of the priorities, in order to be able to determine which items can be dealt with as low-priority or low-significance items.

While you will not be able to include your clients or co-workers in the decisions regarding list modifications for your job responsibilities, you should attempt to view how your decisions to abandon certain obligations or dispose of certain assets, etc. will impact on those components of your life.

Underlying every choice, every ranking, every decision to eliminate or modify assets or activities should be an intrinsic understanding, by you, of

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why you are choosing to adopt this minimalistic approach. If this choice is just one of the many fads that we embrace and abandon, then I urge you to ignore the desire to “try” minimalism. This lifestyle is not a fad diet. It is a long-term reorientation of the way you view life, the world around you, your role in it, and the importance of the manner in which life should be lived.

Look briefly at the way people embrace exercise and physical activity. Some of us are “weekend warriors,” playing a few games of baseball with our buddies on the weekend, and sharing a couple of beers afterward. Some like to jog every day in order to stay in shape. Still others intensely work out for 30 minutes per day, every day. And yet even another few devote several hours of intense effort each day to exercise. Yet, for each, physical exercise is integral to life, just for varying reasons and in varying degrees of importance. Where does minimalism fit in your roadmap of life? That, in part, determines how intensely you should pursue the lifestyle, and the degree to which you should alter your life.

In general, it is difficult to observe people who live lavishly, with fancy cars, expensive clothes & accessories, luxurious homes and exotic vacations, and then make the decision to live minimally. Yet, it is the very opulence of these excessive lifestyles that should provide you with the impetus to reject those monuments to self-indulgence.

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This first step that I have described as part of my 15 Steps to Becoming a Minimalist is the need to identify, inventory and prioritize. That process involves more than the need to identify whether or not you are suited to the minimalist lifestyle. It involves, among other things, identifying what you want out of life, what is important to you, what you will need to give up, what you hope to achieve, what you expect out of this change in direction.

It is commonly assumed that those that seek to acquire things (including money) are seeking to acquire comfort. That may be far-removed from reality. For some, the need to acquire is the need to feel safe from lack or want. For some, it may be that they are looking for social approval and status. For some, it may be that they are uncomfortable with any sort of deprivation. For a few, it may be nothing more than the greed – the need to obtain -- at the expense of others. The reasons are varied and diverse.

Similarly, the reasons for the urge to embrace a minimalist lifestyle are far-ranging. The most common reason for adopting a minimalist way of life is found in the “fox and the sour grapes” fable. What you cannot reach, the fable implies, you are likely to scorn as something not worth having. Hence, many people (students & youths, for example) reject material possessions, largely because they cannot see the wherewithal to obtain those very examples of “arrival.” I have met many aspiring “lean & green” disciples

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who cite the need to be socially responsible as their justification for their new lifestyle. At the same time, a great many seem to want to self-flagellate, punishing themselves for perceived greed. Others subscribe to a political philosophy that requires that they share everything, and aspire for nothing. Still others, in an effort to rationalize indolence, declare that reaching for such mundane goals is beneath them. Minimalism is nothing of the sort described to this point. It is a choice of living in a specific manner that embraces wealth of a different sort – an opulence that recognizes the value in alternative ways of viewing self-indulgence. As a minimalist of many years, I am convinced that I have far greater wealth from choosing my way of engaging life than I had when I owned a multi-million dollar business, and owned a hoard of physical assets. I look forward to assisting you in identifying how you, too, can be wealthy by being poor, and how divesting yourself of everything can make you rich. I look forward to helping you living your minimal lifestyle to the maximum!

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HEAD & HEART CONDITIONING

The second step in my 15 Steps to Minimal Living is head & heart conditioning.

This step is one of the most difficult to do, one of the easiest to skip. Only if you have successfully completed Step 1 -- Identifying & Inventorying -- can you complete Step 2 appropriately. Why are you contemplating the minimalist lifestyle? If the reasons are purely monetary – for example, if you already are experiencing financial problems – then like a diet being forced on you, your efforts at becoming a minimalist will fail. If, however, your reasons for embracing minimalism focus on a desire to get the most out of each moment of life rather than out of each acquisition and possession, you are pointed in the right direction.

Heart & head conditioning requires that you brace yourself for the downside to lean and green living, while being invigorated by what you will gain by “walking gently.” Since lean living means relinquishing many of the excesses that one acquires throughout life, it is important to identify those items as excess, rather than essential. That is where heart versus head conditioning comes into play.

Are you willing to give up your vehicle entirely? Probably not. In fact, the auto is a virtual necessity for many of us. If you live outside the reaches of public transportation, for example, that car

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provides you with the link to your job, family & friends, etc. Even though car pooling, buses, etc. offer options, they may not be realistic or appropriate. When I worked as a business consultant, I kept my auto – a 2000 Toyota Echo – to travel to clients' places of business. Note that the Echo offered the least ostentatious vehicle option. At the same time, it was eco-friendly, great on gas, and provided the ability to transport almost any goods I needed to move.

Deciding to downsize to the Echo, though, was an illustration of heart versus head conflict. Would I have preferred a fancy, upscale vehicle? Probably. However, giving up on greed has its own intrinsic satisfaction.

Close friends of ours decided, a few years ago, to give up owning a vehicle. At the time, they had two teenage children, one of whom was in the middle of getting her driver's licence. This was a bad moment, for her, to be without a car.

Their decision largely was based on a desire to eliminate all of their debts, and pay off their mortgage rapidly. In my view, it was an extreme approach, similar to the concept of crash dieting. For almost two years, they rented a car when necessary, at a significant cost reduction over owning and maintaining one. Shortly after they paid off their mortgage, our friends bought a replacement vehicle and both their daughter and son were able to get their licences.

This intensive approach worked for them (but not

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necessarily for their daughter) because they had a more important goal than owning a vehicle: being debt-free. They also found a more cost-efficient option to owning; namely, renting when the vehicle was needed. If one or the other had needed to drive to work daily, getting rid of the car would not have been a viable option. Claude and Ginette became focused, short-term minimalists!

In deciding on what you are willing to relinquish, examine the emotional attachments and desires that each object represents. Going lean and green should not be a decision to deny yourself of the joys and pleasures of life. Instead, minimal living simply directs you to give up on non-essentials. There are many instances where what may be non-essential for some people has such an emotional attachment that it becomes vital for another.

Last year, we donated our entertainment centre, our love seat, our extra bedroom furniture, exercise equipment, many of our appliances, and my Toyota Echo to others. They had become superfluous.

However, we retained our Wii Fit and television, while dropping our cable coverage. Did we retain a luxury in keeping the Wii station?

In my opinion, we demonstrated pure minimalism. The exercise equipment duplicated our fitness regimen needs, our kids have all moved away (so we did not need the extra furniture), and we are using a minimum of electrical equipment (making

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the appliances unnecessary). The Wii, indeed, represents “lean” for us!

Heart essentials and head essentials each should be evaluated in your plan to go lean and green. The two are not incongruent or incompatible.

Do you understand the difference between need and want? Most of us do not. “I need that new car. I need that new dress. I need that expensive vacation. I need that \$200 ticket to a concert. Do you really?

Part of the reluctance to segregate need from want is the scapegoat of willpower and the difficulty in making choices. When we choose to buy the new stove instead of buying the new television, we are making a choice, using willpower. We all have willpower. We just choose whether or not to use it. We also are demonstrating ability to prioritize, and are separating needs from wants. If it’s a choice between a Jaguar and a minivan, we, again are differentiating between needs and wants, and are exercising a measure of willpower.

Minimalism is about, in part, making a determination of need versus want, and about the varying degrees of need or want. We are not “giving up” anything. We are making a choice between varying levels of importance, and exercising willpower to act on the decision to move toward that which is more important.

But, in so choosing, are we acting in a selfish manner? Indeed, is minimal living actually an act

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of selfishness?

From George Bush to Barack Obama, from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown, from Jean Chretien to Stephen Harper, every leader has, in one way or another, urged us to spend more to save the economy, to create jobs, to make the nation strong.

Conventional minimalism teaches us that we should do without. Environmentalism guides us into using less of nature's resources, and to protect non-renewable and renewable resources alike. Survivalism demands that we eschew the excess of society and government, and rely on more primitive lifestyles.

It seems that the urgings of governments are at odds with the "isms." If we are to rely on the wisdom of collective society, then, we should heed our government, not our urges and isms. Let us examine the paradox of using less being selfish. If we stop using energy, then the earth is not being depleted. However, if we stop using energy, then new research into alternatives will not be needed, and jobs will dry up. If we stop using energy, the cost-per-unit to produce energy for others will increase, and they will suffer, because of our decision.

If we consume less food, we deprive growers, processors and retailers of their livelihood. At the same time, cost per unit, again, will increase, placing a burden on those that do purchase. If we get rid of one of our cars, we'll save gas, and

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wear and tear on roads. But, for every 18 cars on the road, one job is created directly, and four others indirectly.

If we opt to downsize our homes, countless tradesmen will suffer, not to mention lawyers, real estate agents, repairmen, etc.

If we choose to do without government programs and assistance, countless politicians will experience a sense of loss and abandonment, while bureaucrats will slowly become extinct! And think of the loss if we choose to barter, grow our food, help each other instead of relying on social safety nets or learn to enjoy having less but experiencing more!

There are myriad ways to rationalize consumerism over minimalism. We can argue the rights of materialism over minimalism, or vice versa. We can argue the economic and social merits of participating in an aggressive capitalistic approach, or opt to vigorously defend socialism. There are valid arguments for a variety of approaches as to how to live one's life. But the ultimate choice is that which feels right for you, based on your sense of values.

At the same time as others are mocking your choice to "go minimal" you can make a host of arguments to support your position. But why do you need to justify, to anyone?

I choose, though, to live minimally. Instead of using and abusing, I leave, for others, the responsibility and burden of consuming too much,

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living too large and asking for too many rights. My right is the right to waive my “entitlement” to waste, and, if I am displaying a selfish attitude by so doing, that, too, is my right. There are too many people in need for me to believe that rights are granted to me to take extra food out of the mouths of the poor, clean air out of the lungs of the sick and frail, and the right to share in the world’s resources to the detriment of those that treat this world with respect.

I, indeed, suffer from one, if not all, of the isms. And I’ll proudly wear my badge of selfishness.

In making the choice to live more minimally, you should be evaluating your reasons and logic. However, once you have reconciled those relatively objective considerations, it is your heart that should rule.

Be prepared, though, to withstand the judgements of others, the biases of others and the negativity of others. Few are equipped (or want to be equipped) to relinquish the toys that they have been embracing throughout their lives, and are unlikely to understand those that want to do so.

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CHOOSING DIRECTION

Minimalism has elements in common with dieting, such as the giving up of something that may seem important to you, in order to gain something else. However, it is radically different from dieting, in that, if properly structured, it is something that you do not consider to be a loss or forfeiture in the long term. It is harder to return to materialism than it is to remain in minimalist mode, unlike dieting which requires constant vigilance to “keep the weight off.”

It is also substantially different from dieting, in that it can be done in degrees. Try dieting by first reducing calorie intake by 1,000 calories per day, when you are overeating by 2,000 calories per day. The weight will still pile on. “Going minimal” allows you to reduce some of your excess, and still be on track to becoming more economical. This advantage gives you the psychological impetus to continue on your path to reduction, while eating 1,000 excess calories each day still is the wrong direction towards weight loss!

Because of the flexibility in approach to the new program, it is easier for a new convert to “test the waters,” and, at the same time, indoctrinate family, friends and associates into your new view of the world.

Unless the decision is made through necessity, it is unwise to become totally minimalist. For most of us, intrinsic feelings of value and self-

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significance often are measured by the degree of comfort that we have acquired. To deny ourselves of every physical pleasure creates an emotional void. At its worst, it can be unhealthy. For example, to deny oneself the enjoyment of a comfortable bed means that we also deny ourselves the value of a good night's sleep. To insist on eating only the minimum of quality food, or to substitute nutritious food for poor quality food will impact severely on our health. We should not aspire to be material anorexics.

On the other hand, overindulgence brings equally undesirable results. An excess of food leads to unhealthy bodies, while an excess of material goods leads to a narcissistic view of life and our role in it.

Whether you opt for either an extreme approach, or a more reasonable, middle-of-the-road tact, it is the rejection of acquisition and consumption of goods that is at the heart of minimalism. Minimalism should never be used as the rationale or excuse for becoming slothful, and aiming low in the input that you provide to the world around you. I know of several people who have chosen to work minimally, and contribute to the world around them in the least possible way, and use their "goal" of being less focused on materialism as an excuse for their indolence.

Minimalism should focus on using your gifts and abilities for the greatest benefit, while seeking ways to be less of a draw on the resources around

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us. Even that definition, though, fails to recognize that, as you do so, you will gain immensely from the enjoyment of the moment, with a reduced dependence on material goods to generate that enjoyment.

Early in this book, I described the 64 square foot cabin in which I lived. Very few people could have endured, let alone enjoyed a home of that size. However, at that time in my life, my leisure time was spent almost exclusively out of doors, and I needed little space indoors. Had I needed to have Internet hook-ups at home, had I needed to have a refrigerator or large cook stove, this place simply would have been inadequate and unreasonable. The stress that I would have felt from having to make imbalanced tradeoffs in order to accommodate my needs would have detracted from my enjoyment of my home life. At that time, it met my needs. Today, it simply would have been an unwise choice.

Your life situation will be significantly different from mine, or any other person around you. Consequently, your choices should reflect the specific environment in which you live and operate. There is no absolute right way to approach minimalism in terms of specific belongings or priorities. It is up to you to evaluate your life and decide to what level you will participate.

Additionally, take note that what works today may not be suitable tomorrow, as your life evolves.

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Today, you may have young children at home. Tomorrow, you may need to deal with the demands of an aging parent. Next week, your career may be taking a dramatic turn. Next month, retirement may be imminent. All of these events, anticipated and actual, need to be considered as you enter into this novel way of living.

Planning for the conversion to minimalism will be of benefit if you look not only at what you want to eliminate from your life, but what you want to gain. What are your goals and objectives? Do you plan on using the “free money” to retire on a tropical island? Do you want to devote more effort to community service? Is it your plan to spend your free money and time on inventing the next greatest invention? Is minimalism a route to something else, such as saving for that ultimate purchase of a yacht in order to sail around the world? Are you hoping to be able to secrete a nest-egg to leave for your children and grandchildren when you die? Having a focus, as to what you want to do or acquire, as well as what you want to give up provides a more solid base on which to build your efforts at changing your way of living.

Few people diet with the sole purpose of losing weight. They lose weight to feel more energetic, or to improve their health, or to become more attractive.

My wife and I, for example, are embracing our

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chosen lifestyle because we want to be able to work less at conventional jobs in order to focus on our retirement travel, our market garden, and a few environmental projects in which I am involved. Having less means owing and paying less, which means less time is needed to earn, and more time is freed up for our personal choices.

Although one of our goals is to work on eco-friendly projects, you should not confuse minimalism with environmentalism. Environmentalists are focused on using less energy, and reducing their carbon footprint. In many instances, to accomplish that goal, they actually set about to acquire things: wind turbines, solar panels, new furnaces, etc. that use less energy. Their material items become focused on energy-efficient items, which often cost considerably more than less environmentally friendly products.

Minimalism demands that you look at using less, but, rather than purchase new, expensive & eco-aware goods, you may opt to simply eliminate some of those items from your arsenal.

In many ways, eco-warriors contribute significantly to the global economy, by driving demand for responsibly produced goods. On the other hand, minimalists focus on using less, with only minor regard for the impact that choice will have on the economy. In regard to the impact on the environment, however, both “isms” provide an overall positive effect.

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Minimalism, sometimes, is forced upon us. One particular segment of our population often is required to, rather than being allowed to choose being minimal. That group is the single parents, and, in particular, single female parents. Often living in less affluent conditions, daily choices tend to focus on “what we can do without” rather than “what can we reduce.”

Whenever a traditional family dissolves, household assets are split, meaning that two homes now must divide the normal assets of one. That is forced minimalism. Monthly expenses must now be allocated, as well, to maintaining two homes instead of one, so the money that may have been initially spent on furniture and other belongings is diverted toward paying the rent or mortgage on the second home.

This forced minimalism is not necessarily a bad thing, though. When my former spouse and I split, each of us went through a difficult readjustment period, financially. But the people that were most impacted were the children.

Fortunately, we had never been driven to provide all the toys, luxuries and designer clothes that many parents present to their kids. With the decrease in available funds, we tended to reduce our spending on such frills even more.

But the children did not do without. During our first Christmas as a split family, my expenditures on gifts, food and decorations was chopped by two thirds. I chose to spend more wisely. We

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made our own decorations. We celebrated Christmas a few days late, so that we could capitalize on post-Christmas bargains. And we spent several days volunteering at the local food bank and Christmas Cheer Board. In terms of value, that Christmas has remained in the hearts of the kids as one of their favourites.

Minimalism, even when it is forced upon you, can provide great benefit. How you respond to the decrease in material goods determines your perception of its value and impact.

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ALWAYS BE PREPARED

Brendan Brazier, author of the book, *The Thrive Diet*, advocates consuming high net-gain foods for better health. He concedes that this diet results in a significant reduction in body fat reserves. This is logical, since most diets seek to achieve lower body fat.

However, a friend of mine who follows the diet, has found a significant drawback to the diet. Because his body fat reserve has been so significantly depleted, he finds that he must eat more frequently, and that his energy reserves are lower than before, if he skips a meal or two. It is like he has nothing to call upon, once his immediate energy assets are depleted. He does point out, though, that he has greater ongoing energy, recovers more quickly from strenuous work, and feels more mentally alert.

Vince enjoys each day more than he did prior to embarking on the new program, but, on days when he neglects to provide proper nourishment, his lack of a fallback position causes him good deal of stress. He has experienced headache and weakness when he is unable to provide quick nourishment to replenish the energy consumed during a busy day.

The reaction to Brazier's diet regimen is very similar to that of the minimalist diet. When we discard all the waste in our lives, we embrace each moment with greater vitality, see priorities

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and pleasures more clearly, and recover more quickly from setbacks. However, like the Thrive Diet, we find that we have little reserves on which to fall back.

Unless we set aside reserves, if we have a financial setback (due to illness, job loss, etc.), we find that there is little “wiggle room.”

Brazier has a strategy to deal with his lack of body fat. He describes how to prepare, eliminate “biological debt,” plan ahead, recalibrate the body’s reaction to food, hydrate the body, balance mind and body functions and prepare reserve replenishments such as sport and recovery drinks, sport gels, fuel bites and energy bars. These are his pocket reserves, instead of body fat reserves.

In much the same way, the minimalist diet requires that we develop a fallback strategy.

One way to do so is to develop a network of friends to whom you can turn for assistance when you need to call on “reserves.” This seeming reliance on charity is unpalatable for many of us.

Another option is to be a “closet” minimalist. I’m not suggesting that you hide the fact that you are a minimalist. Instead, I recommend that, in the early stages of your “recalibration,” you simply put the assets and items that have been your security blanket for so many years into storage (your closet, or storage room), until you are solidly entrenched in the new way of doing things, and when you have reached the stage where you know that you can do without those

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encumbrances.

Be prepared, too, to consider renting some of the things you may need infrequently, or in the short term. When our friends, Claude & Ginette, got rid of their family automobile, they replaced it with a rental during the few days every couple of weeks when they needed it.

A very “green” concept, known as “car-sharing” has been attempted in numerous centres in England, Sweden, USA and other countries, but has met with limited success, due to our reliance on owning our own vehicle. In the book, WorldChanging.com, this concept has been explored more fully. It is a viable option where you can convince other minimalists and/or environmentalists to participate in such a program. This idea of sharing has been discussed elsewhere in this book, but it is important to reiterate how beneficial the approach is to reducing your dependence on individually-owned assets.

Another fallback strategy is to keep enough cash on hand to tide you through difficult times. If you have opted to sell off some of your assets, that cash should be set aside as a reserve.

One of the beauties, though, of minimalism, is that, like the Thrive Diet, you will find that you need less and less of the old “nutrition” in order to recover from any setbacks. Since you are consuming less to maintain your lifestyle, you will need less to recover to your original position. You

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will also benefit from not having to carry around that excess materialistic fat.

Today's many two-income North American household owners work more than 120 hours per week, in order to pay for and maintain their lifestyles. Away-from-home labour averages more than 95 hours. Prior to adopting a more frugal approach to material living, I often worked in excess of 70 hours per week, just to maintain the standard of existence (it was not living, to me) that my former spouse and I had grown into. Since my conversion and remarriage, the two of us average less than 40 hours per week of away-from-home work, total! That new freedom provides us with an abundance of free time to enjoy our new "luxuries," but also affords us the benefit of having huge amounts of disposable time in which to generate income, if the circumstance requires it.

It is amazing how much stress with which our chosen lifestyles encumber us. Brazier devotes several sections of his Thrive Diet book to discussion of the stress that poor diet places upon our bodies. Similarly, our choice to consume excess "low nutrient" goods in our consumeristic life burdens us with the additional stresses of having to maintain these items, acquire more, and pay off the debt. The lack of free time places more stress on us, while the lack of leisure time burdens us yet again. The cycle repeats and magnifies itself throughout our lives, if we do not choose to discard the premises under which we

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seek to acquire more and more goods.

Yet, few of us recognize how we are burdening ourselves. It takes time to discard the old attitudes, and develop new, invigorating habits.

By establishing a fallback strategy, though, we enable easing into the new way of living, without causing ourselves additional stress and shock.

It is discomfoting for us that our society has become so reliant on “plastic” money. I have long eschewed the use of credit cards and debit cards. For whatever banking I do, I rely almost exclusively on online banking. My wife, who works at a national bank, uses debit and credit cards. As much as possible, I relied on cash.

But the world’s economy makes exclusive dependence on cash unrealistic and not viable. So, we have adapted our own fallback strategy.

My wife’s Visa provides a cash-back offering for purchases that we make. Similarly, her MasterCard provides a rebate. Whenever we make our purchases, we use these cards. However, we insist on paying each monthly amount due before the due date, to avoid interest charges. In this manner, we gain an extra 2% savings on our purchases. Our card also provides health insurance coverage (Canadian) and a few other perks of value to us when we travel. This saves us \$200-30 per year, as well.

By regularly prepaying our charge card debts, we fortify our credit rating. In the past three years, our card limits have been raised three times.

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The idea of using charge cards seems counterintuitive to “going minimal.” Yet, the combination of cards that we hold, plus a strategic plan of usage means that we are getting more for less.

By capitalizing on such financing opportunities, we actually have established an emergency preparedness strategy.

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A SOFT PLACE TO LAND

One of the difficulties in determining which of your belongings are redundant or unnecessary, and which items are essential is being able to separate those items, emotions and activities that are based on nostalgia or false thinking from the truly necessary or unneeded.

Is it necessary, for example, to keep your dining room suite? You raised three children, all of whom have now moved into their own homes. You rarely eat in the dining room nowadays, and prefer to sit at the kitchen table, or at the island to eat. The kitchen table folds open, and, with the leaf inside, could fit six people. You only have four kitchen suite chairs, though. In the past five years, all of the family gatherings have been held at the kids' places.

However, you hope to entertain more regularly in the future. This has been your plan for several years. The dining room suite has been the focal point of family meals on special days for the entire time during which the family lived in the home, and bears the scars and war wounds to prove it.

The table is in great shape, though, and could easily be refinished. It has reached "antique" status, having been purchased from a "collectibles" shop for \$200 twenty-eight years earlier. It has been appraised at being worth more than \$1,500.

Next year, both you and your spouse will be

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retiring, and will be spending at least four months of the winter in a warmer climate.

One of your children has not succeeded financially as well as the other two, and is raising a family of four children.

There are myriad factors that have come into play in the determination as to whether this table is superfluous or not. Some of those factors are purely emotional, some are purely economic, and others are based on false assumptions. Yet, they all must be reflected in the decision regarding retention or disposal of the suite.

Options for getting rid of the table and chairs are numerous. Selling would generate instant cash flow. Keeping the unit possibly would result in appreciation of the value of the table. Giving it to a family member would generate immediate usage for the suite. Selling it, buying a lesser-value set for your child, and pocketing the difference offers a hybrid solution.

With the plethora of choices available to you, the final decision may not be an easy one, and may be further clouded by purely emotional considerations.

This type of mental conflict is common.

When I decided to give up our second car (my 2000 Echo), I was presented with several options. I could sell it and retain the cash. I could give it to a daughter who had no vehicle, but had no driver's licence. I could sell it at a low price to one of my kids. I could sell it and give the money to one of

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them, as well. I could give it to my son.

In the end, I gave the vehicle to one of my sons, who was driving a gas-guzzling 2002 Ford F150 truck, with high insurance premiums. The intent was to enable him to park the truck and use the car – a far more economical and environmentally friendly alternative. However, my son opted to license both vehicles, spent a sizeable amount on “tricking out” the car, and ended up spending more on both vehicles than he would have by just keeping the Ford.

My decision was based, I felt, on logic, but I failed to consider the emotional actions that would cause a 26-year old guy to want to accumulate more “toys” with which to play.

Probably the biggest impediment to relinquishing accumulated possessions, though, is nostalgia. Nostalgia causes us to keep that ugly misshapen plaster ashtray made by your daughter in Grade 1, even though you never, ever smoked. Nostalgia forces you to keep trinkets, statues, pictures and bric-a-brac that serve no practical purpose, solely because your children gave them to you.

So how, if you are intent on not offending your children and friends, do you dispose of items that have no utility or use?

One strategy that my wife and I employed successfully when we downsized our home was to offer those items to our children, so that they could begin the process of keeping keepsakes and nostalgia items. It was surprising how many items

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of prior importance suddenly became disposable when the offspring were faced with the decision as to whether to accumulate or not!

A friend used a similar technique, but took the choice away from the children. She put together a package of collectible items that she had been given, photos given by or of those specific children, and scrapbooks of memorabilia, including report cards, stories, favourite old books and memories. She then presented those packages to each child on his/her birthday. She intends to enjoy leafing through the photos and fondling the knickknacks whenever she visits her kids.

Sometimes, though, the nostalgia items are essentials. The objective of going minimal should never be solely to eliminate stuff from your life. Having reminders of friends and family around you may, indeed, be the essence of your life, and you would more willingly give up your refrigerator than your child's rickety little chair. In that case, keep the chair, and enjoy what it represents.

Only dispose of those items that are not integral to your clean, uncluttered enjoyment of life.

Sometimes, too, you can replace seemingly irreplaceable items with items that easily replace them. Seems contradictory? A great new invention for lovers of photos is the digital photo frame. This gadget allows you to take stacks and stacks of photos, scan them into memory, and display them on a table top or wall. Where 2,000

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photos would fill two boxes and every wall in your home, one digital photo frame can display every picture, and store them in a manner where they will not fade, wrinkle or break down.

Another technique for reducing your household clutter without parting with items that have an emotional attachment is to put together an array of family memorabilia, and rotate it from household to household, so each can enjoy, while making each family member responsible for maintenance, as well.

One of the hardest things my wife's family has had to do recently is to go through a deceased relative's belongings – the marks and markers of her life – and discard anything. Yet, the memory is far more valuable than the object.

In order to deal with disposing and distributing the markers of their lives after the death of my parents without feeling disrespectful to their memory, each family member was asked to select one or two items of particular significance to that person. The remainder was disposed of in a variety of ways. It was not a perfect solution, but it worked.

The problem of determining the significance of an item and the subsequent problem of determining whether or how to dispose of it are at the heart of hoarding. One family member demonstrates that issue clearly, with a home that has moved beyond clutter to disarray and beyond that. That family member is unable to move past making the decision as to what should be kept and what

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should be discarded.

Becoming a minimalist may require that you make difficult choices. However, I have described “being a minimalist,” as well as “going minimal” in this guide. For most of us, we will be going minimal for years to come, as we find ways to relinquish our dependence on items, and rely, instead, on memories.

But, regardless of whether you are “going” or “being,” minimalism should impart a feeling of satisfaction and satiation, not denial and deprivation. Keep what makes your life more complete. Just don’t use material and things as a means to do so!

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PUTTING YOUR FEET UP

Much of our lives is focused on our leisure time. I am not suggesting that much of our time is spent in leisure activities. Unfortunately, that is not the case. We spend far too much time working. But the goal of almost every one of us is to work in order to enjoy life, rather than to live to work.

Most of us, it seems, also are stuck in jobs that we do not enjoy, or even like. Many of us are trapped in an environment where we don't even enjoy our coworkers.

Even though we spend 53% of our waking time during the work week at our jobs, and 35% of our entire day in that environment, our objective is to be able to earn enough or find enough time to enjoy the things that are important to us. It is part of the drive of the younger generation to "party hardy" on the weekends, in order to maximize the amount of free time spent with friends and doing the things that exhilarate us.

While a few of us do attempt to make our place of work more comfortable, with small amenities brought from home, that effort generally tends to be feeble and half-hearted, and we are left to slave away in a setting that is dull, dreary and not stimulating.

The harder we work to achieve the results we want in our free time, or acquire the things that we find soothing, at home, the less time we have to enjoy those things.

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In large part, then going minimal should be focused on allowing us to maximize our enjoyment of our personal lives. That means that the choice is either working harder to acquire material goods, or finding ways to make what we have more pleasurable.

It is ironic that, once we are able to simplify our lives, we get more enjoyment out of each moment. In turn, greater relaxation during off-work hours decreases our stress levels at work. Decreasing the demand for material success means there is less of an urgency to work longer, more intense hours. That makes our hours spent at work more stress-free.

My wife, when I met her, was working full time at a national bank. The combination of financial pressure at home, the conflicts between the staff around her, the lack of choice in the hours that she worked, and the need to always be available when her employer needed her meant that she was largely unable to control her own free time. She was under great stress, and was constantly fatigued at the end of each day. Although she loved the work she was doing, she loathed the fact that she had no choice or option.

Shortly after we married, we made the decision to renovate and sell her home. Without renovating, her equity would have been minimal. By investing in new acquisitions (the remodelling materials), we were able to sell her home and recognize significant cash on hand from the sale. We

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downsized, and were able to save on the subsequent mortgage and operating costs of the new home.

The decreased debt load meant that Janice was able to “go casual,” working only on the days that she agreed to be available. This provided a benefit to the bank, in that they did not have to pay fringe benefits, yet still had an experienced employee on which to rely in a pinch. Always an outgoing person, Janice found that she was able to engage with her customers even more fully, which benefitted the bank.

Because she was no longer bound to the bank at their whim, Janice found that the in-fighting and disputes between employees that used to eat at her during the day no longer had any impact on her. Her stress levels dropped dramatically.

By working only 3-4 days per week, Janice was able to spend more time with her children, and was able to get involved in renovating our next home. It was a task that she loved. Within a year, that home had been sold for a good profit, as well. Now, we had enough money in reserve to plan our future vacations, and build our final home, debt free.

Being debt free, Janice was able to opt to work as few as 2 days or as many as 5, if she chose. This versatility meant that she was now in high demand at other branches, to fill in when staff were on vacation or ill. Now, she had a wealth of options and virtually no stress, all springing from the

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decision to simplify and get rid of the excessive load that a large family house had inflicted on her. The choice to do so was predicated on one assumption: in order to get rid of the stress, she had to focus less on earning more and more on needing less. That assumption, too, was founded on the idea that she was not living to work, but working to live, and that the ultimate goal was to allow her the freedom to choose what was important in her life.

Even though Janice currently works 3-5 days each week, she does so because she loves it, not because she needs to do so.

If you find that your reasons for opting for a minimalistic approach is due to the overbearing stress in your current life, take the time to understand whether that stress is because you are doing what you don't like to do, or if it is because you are being squeezed into a position where you have no choice about how you spend your waking hours.

Many people love their work and love their coworkers. They just don't love being compelled to do everything on someone else's whim. If that describes you, your objective should be to find a way to relieve the stress, and thus, enjoy your work.

If you would prefer to spend as much time as possible away from work, living and enjoying life, take the time to find what it is you enjoy, and focus upon achieving that goal.

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Perhaps your idea of relaxation is to park yourself in front of a television and “veg out.” That is as legitimate as the desire to spend your weekends involved in “extreme skiing” or exploring the Mayan ruins. Your preferred form of leisure is yours to determine alone.

Of course, if you want to relax in front of a television, then you probably should look at your new 50 inch HD or 3-D television as an essential, and that SUV parked in the driveway as a frill. If you want to explore the backwoods, then discard the TV, BlueRay and surround-sound system, and keep the 4-wheel drive. It is essential to you.

This is another beauty of minimalism, which differentiates it from dieting.

When you diet, you are asked to give up the things that you like the most: sweets, meats and treats. When you go minimal, you are asked to give up the things you like least!

Sometimes, what we think we enjoy we really do not. My ex-spouse insisted that she loved being in the country as much as possible. After all, she was raised in the country.

Unfortunately for me, I found out that “as much as possible” meant that she could only live at my country cabin when the weather was sunny and hot, when my stepson was not in school, when she was on holidays and only if the “bloody birds” did not sing at 4 or 5 a.m. That left only about a half dozen days each year when it was possible to be in the country.

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If she had opted to give up her house in the city to live at the lake, she would have been immensely unhappy.

Like the Little Engine in the Learning Song, “Learn to Know Before You Go.” Be sure that what you think is important really is, and be sure that what you think will make you happy in your leisure life really will do so.

Once you have determined what your recreation needs and wants are, you can begin to sort through the non-essential items that you own. As in all other aspects of going minimal, I recommend that you do not approach discarding of the material facets of your leisure life too aggressively. Phase out the chattels that you feel that you can do without gradually.

Also in keeping with the other aspects, be sure that you are comfortable with the differences between needs and wants. This is most difficult to determine as it relates to your entertainment and relaxation, since leisure is important to our sense of comfort and well-being.

My wife recently experienced a minor health problem. While she is not a coffee fanatic, she does require her three cups per day, and has steadfastly refused to give up her daily caffeine fix. In that, she is similar to almost every other coffee drinker. “You can take away my sugar, you can take away my desserts, you can take away my daily glass of red wine or my chocolate, but don’t touch my coffee!” But when faced with the need

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to relinquish her coffee or suffer through the health issue, the coffee lost out.

Although it was important to her, there were other things more vital than caffeine.

Many of our leisure items and activities are like that. Yes, we need our television. We may argue that we need to keep abreast of the news, or that there are educational shows for the children, and so on. But do we really need it, or are there less consumeristic alternatives? Do we need the full spectrum of shows, or could we cut back to basic television programming?

Yes, we need our Internet connection. But do we need full high-speed, or could we function well with just high-speed lite?

Yes, our golf game is vital. But do we need full membership in that elite club, or could we survive nicely on a public golf course.

In some instances, the alternative to the high-end product in our homes is less expensive, and offers greater advantages.

Until a few years ago, we had a quality treadmill, a weight bench, a workout centre, an Airmaster, a rowing machine and other exercise equipment in our basement. On average, all of the equipment was used less than 20 minutes per day.

Friends of ours opted to forego the home gym, and cycle daily to the public indoor pool, where they swam for an hour daily. Other friends gathered at the local gym, where they were able to work out and socialize. We joined a dance group,

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paying a few dollars each week for lessons. Each of these activities cost less than the interest on our home equipment would have cost, if we had financed their purchase. But, in addition, we gained a significant social interaction opportunity. When we moved away from the city, we got rid of all our exercise equipment, and purchased a Wii system. This unit costs less than any one of the exercise pieces, and has provided hundreds of hours of fitness and entertainment already. Consider how essential each of your leisure toys really are, and whether you could do without, or find a better alternative.

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DOUBLE DUTY, HALF THE CASH

A couple of years ago, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek article about a test to my minimalistic philosophy to which I had been subjected. That article follows, here.

From 2002 to 2004, I owned one knife – no more than that.

This one knife was a fish filleting knife. It saw duty as a paring knife, as a fish skinning knife, as a wire stripper, as a butter knife, as a dinner knife, and even as a poor flat screwdriver blade.

I had not intended, in 2002, to be a minimalist. I had no concept of what being a minimalist entailed. I simply had no need of any other knife.

When I remarried in 2005, I inherited more than 60 knives. There were dinner knives, steak knives, bread knives, electric knives, meat carving knives, paring knives, pocket knives, multi-tool knives, cheese knives, cleaving knives, and other knives whose purpose I could not guess. Of course, there were also duplicates of those knives. The knives, to me, represented the difference between consumerism and minimalism. Each type of knife simplified a given chore, or made use of a knife a little easier for that specific task. But each knife also required specific care: cleaning, sharpening, storing and handling

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varied for each knife.

While each chore was made easier with the correct knife, keeping track of that knife became more complex than caring for one knife.

A multitude of knives meant, too, that many people could do many tasks concurrently with each other (not that it happened frequently). But an assortment of people handling a range of knives complicates the task of tracking & caring for the items.

With my one knife, I never felt the need for more. But now that I possess dozens, I see better quality, more attractive, more durable knives that I want. Ornate handles, eversharp blades, and superior, indestructible quality make each new offering a “must-have” product. There are risks, as well, with owning a plethora of culinary scalpels. Cuts are more frequent, breakage more common, cleanliness more essential. I can no longer just wipe the filleting knife on my trousers. Each knife need be sterilized. Each knife requires storage, and specialized storage, at that.

And I needed to learn etiquette as it pertains to the proper use of knives.

I am baffled at how I was able to survive for three years with only one knife. I marvel at the rugged pioneer independence of those that have fewer knives than I now possess, and wonder how they manage to tolerate such

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primitive living.

In 2002, I had no need of two knives. Now, I cannot fathom being without at least 60. It is my minimum.

At this point, I must confess that I have employed a bit of hyperbole here. My wife and I did joke, a few years back, about the plethora of knives that we owned. Fortunately, as each of our children moved into their own home, we were able to pare down our stock of knives, by passing off a half dozen or so to each of them. We still own nearly two dozen knives, and would love to get rid of them.

But minimalism does not happen instantly, or exist in an absolutely pure state. We, like every dieter or environmentalist, have a ways to go, and always are able to look at our current situation and see room for improvement. I hope to be able to cut down on the number of knives even more, but accept the truth that we are not “perfect” minimalists, yet.

It is so much simpler to find reasons why you should retain an item than it is to find reasons why you should relinquish it.

You ask yourself, “should I keep my SUV?” Well, in snow, it handles better than a car. On long trips, we need the extra room. Generally, it is more safe than a subcompact. Sometimes, I need to haul cargo. When we take the grandkids to the lake, we need the extra seating. The seats are easier on my back. I find it easy to get in and out

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of my SUV. I need to tow a utility trailer sometimes. Easily, there could be another half dozen reasons.

But these “reasons” are often nothing more than excuses, in disguise.

An SUV stops no better than a car on icy roads, and sometimes even more poorly because of its extra weight. Icy or snowy roads happen less than 5% of the year, and you will be driving on them less than half of that time.

I own a Prius that comfortably accommodates four of us on 8,000 km, road trips. This is about how many people (or fewer) typically use an SUV on a road trip.

Many sedans and compacts offer equal or better safety features than most SUVs, with a greater survivability rating.

SUVs are inefficient cargo haulers. Since most of us haul cargo less than twice per year, paying the lumber yard or furniture store to deliver is far more economical than paying the interest, insurance, maintenance and fuel on an SUV for a full year, in order to be able to haul your own limited amount of cargo.

In the last three years, you may have taken the kids to the lake by themselves only once. Every other time, their parents drove them. When you do need to carry that one extra passenger that a small car could not accommodate, rent a mini-van! Toyota has specifically designed several of their models of car to allow for ease of entry and exit for

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seniors, and has constructed cathedral seating for maximum comfort of rear-seat passengers.

A compact car can tow a light utility trailer as easily as can an SUV.

So, we see that “reasons” and “excuses” often are confused or juxtapositioned.

But if you need reasons to hang onto some of your possessions, then probably the best is that each item serves more than one purpose.

For us, determining the “double duty value” of our items is the primary consideration, above their aesthetic value.

The preceding knife anecdote is an example. My filleting knife served a multitude of purposes.

There are, however, many multi-use items that simply are ineffective and inefficient. Try using the knife and fork in a Swiss army knife at the same time, if you want a crystal-clear illustration!

In the 1980s movie, *Gremlins*, the nutty inventor attempted to market the “bathroom buddy,” an odd and eclectic mix of an array of bathroom appliances. It was a humorous example of the silliness of some combo items.

I can think of no better real-life example than the old TV/Stereo/VCR combo. Inevitably, one of the three integrated components would fail, and you would need to buy a replacement for it. Buying one was a case of false economy.

Another frustrating multi-purpose tool is the “universal remote.” While these gadgets can accommodate several electronic media

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simultaneously, new DVRs, BlueRay players, gaming stations, TVs and so on are entering the market almost weekly. Each has a unique “signature” for the remote, and many require specific controllers. Almost every friend’s home that I visit displays at least one universal remote, parked on the coffee table along side at least two other necessary controllers.

“Double duty” items can be deceptively inappropriate and inadequate, and are a waste.

On the other hand, a great many of our accessories and assets truly offer multi-purpose potential, but are seldom employed as such.

For example, we gave away our teapot, even though we drink at least two cups of various teas each day. Instead, we use our coffee maker to brew tea, as well as make coffee.

A former colleague had an incredibly beautiful array of wine glasses. At one social gathering, he educated me on the specific use, for specific wines and fortified wines, for each style of glass. There were fourteen separate glasses and goblets, each specifically intended for each unique type of wine. He also had on display nine sets of beverage glasses, each designated for a specific beverage. I was greatly impressed! More than 300 glasses, to serve the six guests he generally had at each soiree. And he needed each and every glass.

On the other hand, I find very little difference in taste when I drink my wine from a goblet or

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tumbler. Maybe I am a little crude and have no taste, but I also do not have more than \$2,100 invested in liquid silica.

Do you really need 300 beverage containers? If you do, I urge you to forfeit your dream of becoming a minimalist.

My son used to use his Playstation to play DVDs. I was unaware that it was even possible, yet, he was able to eliminate a DVD player from his entertainment system.

I garden, and do so at the commercial level. There are more than fifteen styles of shovels and spades on the market, to be used for specific purposes in the backyard garden. I own two, and one gets used only a few times each season. Yet, many devoted hobbyists own several. Do they need them?

I confess that I own a surfeit of tools. I do a lot of home repairs, though, and the cost of my tools has more than been offset by the cost that I would have incurred to call a tradesman to do the repairs. That is a poor rationalization for my indulgence.

The tools that I use most frequently for mechanical repairs are simple box/open end wrenches. But I own ratchet wrenches, specialty pliers, offset wrenches and so on.

These tools, though, are not examples of excess. With eight kids between the two of us, my wife and I experience an endless demand for us to repair things around the homes of our offspring. A few

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are mechanically inclined, and we lend our tools out regularly. Similarly, friends of ours use these tools frequently. By having a central source for equipment, our family and friends are able to forego the expense of buying their own stuff. In that way, these tools serve double duty.

In the book, *WorldChanging*, an apartment modular station used in the Abito project in the UK serves as a kitchen unit, bathroom, bedroom suite and wardrobe. This composite structure allows 370 feet of apartment space to function like a unit two or three times its size.

When I built our yurt, I incorporated storage under the deck platform, so that I could eliminate the need for a storage shed.

Although it is incomplete, our bedroom unit will consist of a writing/makeup desk, dressers, wardrobe and canopy. This frees up lots of floor space.

One of the original double-duty pieces of furniture is the “hope chest” serving as a coffee table, as well.

High-quality convection oven/microwave combinations are on the market, eliminating the need for a second oven, a toaster oven and so on. Consider building a dividing wall that includes a sliding pantry component and storage closet, instead of fixed walls and conventional doors.

Even clothing can serve several purposes. In fact, clothes offer the greatest potential for cross-use. By designing a wardrobe with easily mixed-and-

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matched pieces, the number of units can be reduced. I have a system of clothing use that separates “dressy” outfits, everyday office wear, everyday home wear, work clothes and grease rags. Each piece progresses through that chain, enabling me to forestall unnecessary purchases. Consider buying convertible jackets that can carry you through three seasons, instead of coats for each season.

Do you need the lighting and lamps that you currently have, or could you find a way to rearrange your layout so that fewer lights are needed. Could fixed lighting replace lamps? Could strategically placed mirrors enhance the lumens of your lighting units, and also serve as dressing mirrors? Sometimes, simply by rearranging, we can eliminate pieces of furniture. Carry that concept to the extra chairs, end tables, accent tables, and so on.

In an old Seinfeld episode, Kramer “simplifies” his salad preparation by washing the lettuce while he is showering. The resulting expressions of revulsion and disgust are predictable, and I am not sure I would be willing to go to such an extreme. But we dump our water from our showers and sinks into the sewer system, then take nice fresh water to water our lawns, trees and gardens. Why not invest in a very inexpensive gray water recovery system, and divert that sink and shower water onto the vegetation?

Half of us own water coolers, with 5-gallon tanks

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of bottled water sitting on them. Why not invest in a simple Brita filter pitcher and keep it in the refrigerator? If bottled water is essential, why not store it, as needed, in the fridge?

Around the house, there are scores of items that easily could be used for several purposes. Yet, we buy our hot air poppers, our rice cookers, our deep fryers, our electric skillets, our George Foreman grilles, our hand blender, tabletop blender, chopper, processor, grinder, hand mixer, stand mixer and so on, using each probably no more than twice per year, when our variety of mixers and blenders could be reduced to one, our skillets and grilles cut down to one stovetop unit, and so on.

We carry a cell phone and laptop, and subscribe to Internet access for both. We tie into our land line at home, and our high-speed, hard-wired Internet in the home-based office. We carry our GPS on trips, while having a GPS app on our Blackberry. Can we not find ways to eliminate this duplication?

Easily, 20-30% of our goods could be eliminated by sacrificing a small amount of convenience in exchange for a large amount of freedom and reduced clutter. All we need to do is to look for ways to make existing assets serve more than one purpose.

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TUPENCE, CAUTIOUSLY, FRUGALLY INVESTED

Learn to know economical from expensive.

Minimalism is not about doing without. It is not about continual sacrifice. It is about doing more (or, at minimum, the same amount) with less. That may sound a little like one of the three Rs of environmentalism – Reduce. But minimalism is about making choices that make sense, not necessarily making choices to leave less of a footprint. The end result may be the same, but the motivations may differ.

Let us consider the choice of apple sauce or pork and beans. In the grocery store, a can (14 oz or 400 ml) of beans may cost you ninety cents or so, but no more than \$1.20. A jar of apple sauce, on the other hand, may cost upwards of \$3.00 for 900 ml (32 oz). Yet, both are relatively inexpensive. Both can be grown and produced by you. If both can be produced by you, then, should not a true minimalist make his/her own beans or apple sauce? Not necessarily.

This fall, we made our own apple sauce, from a basket of tart apples picked from our own tree. To make six quarts took us four hours. That's hardly a productive use of our time, since we were working for less than \$5 per hour! Yet, our only inputs (the tree was in the yard before we were) were a little bit of cinnamon, the jars (which we already had) and the heat to do the canning. We canned on a

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cool day, so the heat generated would have been generated anyway, to heat our home. That meant our only true cost was less than fifteen cents worth of cinnamon.

We made the apple sauce on a day when we both had little else planned, so we did not underutilize our time.

On the other hand, we also grew a variety of beans. Those beans could have been made into canned beans with pork. Instead, we chose to pickle them and freeze some. Less energy input was required on the hot summer days when they were ripe for the picking. Our net cost to pickle and freeze? About six cents per pound. To can them into brown beans with pork would have required sugar, cooking heat, spices, and tomato or molasses. And the time to prepare them for canning would have exceeded four hours for twenty pounds. At a retail price of \$1.00 per pound, we would have saved \$20 over store-bought beans, minus the input costs of forty cents per pound, and worked for \$3.00 per hour. That is considerably less than what we earned on the apple sauce.

There are three additional major differences, though. The homemade apple sauce is pure, with no artificial preservatives added, and no sugars. And we used recycled jars, rather than aluminum cans. For the beans, we had an easier option: freezing. For virtually no cost, and little labour, we preserved the same quantity of beans as we

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would have canned in the pork 'n beans scenario. Sometimes, it is an act of minimalism to buy, rather than produce an item yourself. But where your inputs will exceed what is consumed by commercial production, where quality of doing it yourself far outweighs commercial product quality, or where commercial products generates excess waste, “doing it yourself” is the minimalist’s best option.

Minimalism, it seems then, is not as simple as “doing with less” or “doing it yourself.” It is also about “doing it smart.”

Dr. Frank De Luca says, “A rich life is cultivated, not learned.” But Napoleon Hill and Andrew Carnegie’s book, “Think and Grow Rich,” focuses on how to acquire financial wealth and live in riches, and virtually ignores the De Luca philosophy of richness of living. It is this rush and thrust toward material success that blindly leads many of us to assume that material wealth and rich living are synonymous. They are not. I know few people who feel they have reached the pinnacle of wealth accumulation. In fact, a constant in today’s world is that the vast majority of the upper middle income and upper income earners do not categorize themselves as “wealthy.” It is almost comical to observe a politician trying to re-define “middle class” so that he and his well-heeled family will fit, or re-brand his middle-income upbringing as a “poor Joe” experience, so that he can relate to the masses.

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Indeed, it is an axiom of society that, whatever we have, there is more that we need.

Unfortunately for most of us, the quest for a rich life bypasses the real richness that is available to every person.

Living a minimalistic life can be very easy, very sanguine. However, it is getting to that level of comfort that poses critical challenges. Converting to a rich man's lifestyle on a poor man's budget is rewarding, but it will require some thought and significant adjustments.

One of the problems that we, as consumers, have is the inability to recognize value: that is, the difference between expensive and economical. Expensive can, indeed, be economical, while "cheap" often reflects just the opposite.

A \$32,000 toy hardly is anyone's idea of simple living, or of "doing without." Yet, my \$32,000 car precisely represents how I view minimalism, and how that kind of cost can be justified as being responsible.

My toy is a 2009 Prius – a hybrid vehicle that, in winter, gets 42mpg (Imperial gallons, 51 US gal.), and 60 mpg in the summer. Yes, that is a little way from the 72 mpg rating that it has received, but those tests are made on the flat, at constant temperatures and speeds without the air conditioner on. But this kind of mileage is one of the reasons I bought my responsible toy. Each year, based on the average distances I drive, with a fuel cost of \$4.50/gal (Cdn), I will spend \$2,700.

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The next best mileage in a comparable vehicle would cost me \$900 more per year. I plan on keeping that car 20 years. I will save \$18,000 in fuel alone.

My experience with Toyota vehicles is that they last longer than the Energizer Bunny. My most recent car, a Toyota Echo, is still going (I gave it to my son to replace his Ford F150), and has 496,000 km on the odometer. It has been treated extra roughly, maintained poorly, and used, often, like an off-road vehicle. But, until I gave it to my son, I spent less than \$1,900 on repairs and maintenance, including tires and windshield wipers! Estimated cost of maintenance and repair on the average sedan is more than \$1,100 per year, so I will save at least \$16,000 on repairs. My Prius is not a small car. We have transported my wife's parents on long excursions on three occasions. Luggage for four people, plus those passengers still did not fill the car completely. So, I will seldom need to rent a trailer or U-Haul to move items.

The Prius is designed for older people, with its easy-entry doors, high seats, good site lines. We will still be able to drive this car safely when I am almost 80!

The car's colour is quite neutral. Fewer washings, less worry about fading, easy exterior maintenance all reduce costs.

Toyotas hold their value. If I needed to sell the vehicle, my return would be far better than any

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domestic car. So, again, its initial cost is not a cost, but an investment.

There are dozens of other reasons why this car is economical, dozens of reasons why it represents green stewardship, dozens of reasons why it is the best car a minimalist could buy. There are very few reasons you could find as to why buying the Prius is an act of excess, or indulgence. But, in spite of all the pros, and very few cons, there is one overriding reason why I bought this car – my wife insisted on it!

In this illustration, we saw how “expensive” can equate to “economical.” But “cheap” can be just as easy to demonstrate.

Recall the VCR/TV combo that I mentioned in the previous chapter. Those units used to sell for \$75-125. But they seldom lasted longer than a year, and needed to be replaced. A reasonable, small flat screen television can be purchased for \$200-250, yet lasts upwards of 5-8 years. That converts to an annual cost of \$25-50 per year – a far better value than the combo. At the same time, these new units use less energy, while displaying a far superior picture.

Even a minimalist needs some luxuries and accessories. The choice facing us is not whether to buy, but what to buy.

Let us look at a simple purchase of meat. Should we buy the chicken breast at \$3.99 per pound, or the cheap chicken necks and backs at \$1.25? Strip the meat off the backs, and you obtain less

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than ¼ pound of meat per pound of backs, for a net cost of \$5.00 per pound of meat.

Do you buy the \$3 set of six screwdrivers in the Dollar Store, or do you go with the \$40 set of 12 divers in the hardware store? If you use your screwdrivers for heavy work, or if you use them more than a couple of times each year, the \$40 set will last you 30 years, while the \$3 set will last one. \$3 per year of intense use or \$1.33 per year of reliable use?

On the other hand, should you buy the expensive foil wrap or the cheap stuff? It depends on to what use the foil is being put.

Or weather-stripping. Spend \$30 for a door stripping kit every 6 years, or use the \$5 foam tape, once each year? Now you must look at the effectiveness of the foam versus vinyl, and calculate the energy costs and savings.

Measuring value versus cost can be difficult, sometimes. When it comes to clothing, some fabrics seem durable, but may wear prematurely. Price is not always an indicator of quality. Attach a designer label to an article in your closet, and the costs magnify, yet the quality may not.

Even food prices and value may be tough to decipher. Should you buy fresh vegetables, at all times? Generally, fresh means nutritious. But flash-frozen veggies may be fresher than produce department products. Even canned veggies, if preserved naturally, may hold more nutrients than so-called fresh goods. Value, now, depends on

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taste.

To assess value and economy, you will need to evaluate the usage to which the item will be put. A coffee table sees daily (sometimes hourly) use, and needs to be durable. On the other hand, the accent table in the guest room sees use once every month or two. Which needs to be given the greatest weight when buying? At the same time, why not rotate the old, well-worn coffee table into the guest room and get a few more years of life out of it?

By gradually phasing out items of furniture, clothing (see my discussion on my sequence of use for my clothes) and equipment, you reduce the frequency with which you will need to replace items.

Consider, as well, whether you need to purchase items new, or if they could be purchased as used items. Yes, I know it is tough on the ego to buy second-hand, but why? Hand tools last a lifetime, but can often be found at garage sales. Baby clothing gets less than one year of use, but has five years of life. Probably the best “used” purchase is a book! A well-read book often indicates a well-written book, so you are gaining the knowledge that you will not be buying trash when you spend 25 cents or a dollar on a used paperback. And, when done, you can sell it at your own garage sale for the same price that you paid. That garage sale may be a gold mine. For several years, our family held annual garage sales,

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stripping away stuff we no longer needed, in order to replenish the items that we did need. It is a great way to garner extra value out of everything you own.

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MENTALLY DE-CLUTTER

The greatest hurdle to reorganizing our lives and our living space is clutter. Many homes that, on the surface, appear neat and organized in fact are cluttered. The clutter is less visible than that of a hoarder, but it exists, and impedes the clear path to minimalism.

In many cases, the clutter is mental.

I have a relative who is a hoarder. Progressively over the past ten years, this person and spouse have seen, first, the yard littered with toys and play structures. Slowly, the mess moved onto the deck, squeezing out all entertainment space. It moved to the front yard, with seasonal decorations remaining up from one season to the next, and the next.

Over the years, the basement and storage shed were filled to overflowing. Then the living room disappeared under clothes, books, papers and bags. Lastly, the bathroom and kitchen living areas were sacrificed to the mess. It reached the point of being unsanitary, with the dishwasher plugged with dirty and abandoned pots and plates, and the kitchen counters mounded with food-encrusted containers. The clutter and disorganization reached the stage of being intolerable, when a 20-liter pail was placed on the floor to catch used coffee grounds. It was 1/3 full at my last visit.

One of the partners occasionally makes an effort

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to clean, moving clothes into separate piles for each child, and piling papers and books belonging to the spouse near the computer. It is to no avail, as none of the other family members seem willing to participate in the cleanup. It fails, as well, because this person is not dedicated to the task, and only reacts when things become absolutely (not nearly) intolerable. The clutter has reached crisis.

As obvious as this person's problem is to an outside observer, it is not so obvious within the chaos. When I asked, on one occasion, if they had seen the show "Hoarders," the response was instantaneous.

"It's not that bad!" They were indignant that they had been casually compared to these extreme collectors.

It is surprising how few people recognize the disarray in their lives. The bookworm who surrounds himself with stacks of unread books and magazines claims that he intends to read them soon. The backyard mechanic who piles his tools where he last used them, and then can't recall leaving them there. The teenager with a floor that is six inches of dirty and clean clothes and believes that his room is clean. They all embrace "organization" and understand "clean" in a different way.

It has been postulated that hoarders often accumulate stuff as a manifestation of an inner emotional need. That likely is true.

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An older homeowner in the city in which I grew up recently sued the city for damaging his belongings, when the city was forced to proceed with bulldozers to remove the trash from his yard. According to the city, the stuff was junk, and a hazard. According to the homeowner, they were valuable items that he was planning on selling in his retirement.

To most of us, that smacks of mental illness. In reality, it may simply be a matter of inner perception, like an anorexic that sees herself as too fat, or a balding, overweight, toothless and sweaty fifty-five year old male who sees himself as a stud.

For years, I had great difficulty in looking at myself in a mirror. I had been raised to believe that relying on a mirror was a sign of vanity. I came to believe that. For two years in the early 2000s, I did not own one household mirror. I shaved “by touch.” I was clean and neat, yet I could not bring myself to observe my appearance in the mirror.

When I began taking ballroom dance lessons, the instructor requested that we observe our postures and footwork in the wall-to-wall mirrors. I needed to train myself to do so. Now, I have no problem looking in a mirror. I still tend to look “past” myself, though.

Where did this habit begin? I have often laughed about a comment that my mother frequently directed our way, to motivate us to work hard and succeed in life.

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“You better get used to hard work,” she would say, “because none of us are going to ever get by on our looks.”

I remembered that line from my early childhood, and often recited it. Yet, subconsciously, I had failed to deal with it, and had absorbed its essence.

We are all influenced by what we have absorbed throughout our life. Many times, we fail to confront the fallacies on which we base our current actions. The gathering of wealth is one of those fallacies.

We equate success with what we own, rather than what we are. A friend of mine who operates an eastern-philosophy training program begins his orientation sessions with the line, “We are human beings, not human doings.” Uday Chudasama lives his life in that manner, guided by the knowledge that we should not base our lives on what we do or have, but on how we live.

Western culture has taught us more than to be human doings. It has drilled into us that we are human havings!

“Look at that car, or that mansion. Boy, is he a success!”

Really? How did he live life, to get where he is materially? What goes on behind those closed doors, or in that person’s mind? What are his priorities?

A relative of mine loves his electronic toys. He has every gadget, game and technological innovation one could ever want. Yet, he struggles

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to find ways to buy more, show off what he has and get his money's worth out of using them. Those are his priorities, I suppose, but has he managed to fit actual living into his appliance-cluttered life?

If we are indoctrinated with the idea that having stuff provides us with validation that we have “achieved,” or if we gather stuff around us out of fear that we will be deprived someday and that we need to prepare for that eventuality, or if we accumulate to compensate for an emotional void, we are cluttering our thinking, and cluttering our potential for enjoyment of each day.

But how to we break that cycle of dependence and disarray? Physical clutter starts with mental clutter. It has its foundation in an inability or unpreparedness to understand our own inner needs, and in our confusion of needs versus wants. It is based in a deficit in the willingness to prioritize. We want it all.

In order to de-clutter your room, you must de-clutter your self-awareness and self-understanding.

Are we really likely to face a cataclysmic loss of everything we have? And, if we face a drought of income, wouldn't we rather have cash on hand to weather the storm than a collection of DVDs, electronics, clothes, furniture, tools, vehicles, and so on?

If we need to show off what we own, wouldn't we rather own “character” and experiences, than toys

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that become obsolete quickly?

If we need to have memories and memorabilia stack up around us to remind us of good times and make us feel comfortable, wouldn't we rather be able to stretch out, and remember while we sip a hot chocolate instead of rummaging through stacks of old clippings, bags of trinkets and piles of scavenged goods?

The first step in being able to de-clutter your home is, therefore, being able to de-clutter your head. Understand yourself, and the underlying factors that drive you to gather, and own. Understand how that need for material goods can be redirected. Then understand how you can organize your thinking, in order to organize your surroundings.

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CONDITIONING THE PACKRAT

While internal de-cluttering is the most mentally draining task that you will face in your journey towards a more minimalistic lifestyle, material de-cluttering is the most physically strenuous.

In order to effectively de-clutter, you need to begin by organizing. Consider this task to be like a healthy-body regimen. Set your goals for your new self-image. Determine how you will reach those goals (e.g. calorie-conscious diet, exercise, nutrition, etc.). Set the objectives realistically for your de-clutter diet, and set target dates by which you will achieve each objective. Determine who and what you will need to enlist to accomplish your task. Family member cooperation is important. Having a set plan and space in which to begin is also vital.

First, you will need to add some items to your collection: several 10- or 30-liter plastic storage tubs, a collection of perishable goods storage containers, and a couple of 4- or 5-rack resin shelving units.

Begin by clearing an used room of all furnishings. Having already prioritized belongings according to the principles previously described, you will know which of your items are redundant, which are needed and which are wanted.

With the room clear, bring in those items that clearly are not either needed or wanted. Decide whether you want to sell, trade or donate these

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items, and mark and sort them accordingly.

An excellent program for getting rid of unwanted items is the Freecycle program, established online and operating in many cities (www.freecycle.org). Here you can post goods that you no longer want, but may have some value to other people. It is a little like curbside trading, where you place unwanted, usable items on the curb with a sign indicating that they are free for the taking.

You may also want to donate these items to a charity. Many used-goods stores and chains operate across North America.

If your goods can be sold, set them aside for your annual garage sale, or organize a garage sale with your neighbours.

Unfortunately, once you have handled all of these easy choices – the stuff you clearly don't want or need – you are left with the merchandise with baggage. Nostalgia and fond memories often accompany what otherwise would be the most useless of articles.

Here is where we separate the packrat from the free spirit, and help to adjust the priorities and behaviours of that pack rat.

The next step in your process is to select those items from another room that you have not used in 6 months, in 3 months, and in one month. While you may have identified items as being necessary versus wanted, this exercise will help you to clarify and refine that choice.

Clearly, items that have not been used in six

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months do not have a high priority in your life. Even tools that are seldom used fall into that category.

Before you rebel, and assume that I am advocating that you get rid of these items, pause one moment. I am not asking you to do any such thing (just yet).

However, some of those items may be newspapers or magazines that you intended to read. If you have not done so yet, you likely will not. Be prepared to part with them.

Perhaps the collection includes clothes that you believe you will fit into or wear, someday soon. Again, the likelihood is that you will not.

But let's begin with those items that you have not used in over one month, but have used within the past three. These items deserve our first focus, as they clearly have some value. If you truly believe that they are non-essential, put them in the garage sale group. If you will need them within three months set up a separate pile for that purpose. If you do not intend to use them again within the year (decorations and seasonal items excluded), set them in a group of belongings that are those things that you are unlikely to need.

Arrange all of the items within this room in groupings that include 1) to be used within 1 month, 2) to be used within 3 months, 3) to be used within 1 year, 4) not intended for use within 1 year.

Now, set up the storage racks and containers that

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you purchased in the newly emptied room and place all of the items, with the oldest categories first, in the storage units and shelves.

Move to your third room, and sort that room in the same manner as you did for the first, and, again, store the items in the shelves and tubs according to time before they will be used again. Once you have sorted and emptied three rooms in this manner, return to the containers and shelves of sorted goods.

Review the category of goods that will not be used within 1 year. These should not include seasonal items (Halloween, Christmas, Hanukkah, etc.), since they would be used within a one-year period. Many of these items may have been identified by you as “needed,” but, if they are so seldom used, then you likely should re-evaluate their need. If you can do so, arrange to get rid of them.

The second group will likely include items that you have identified as needed, but that have only one function or role. See if you can find another item in your collection of goods that could perform the same task as the item in the over-six-month group. Arrange to get rid of the duplicate item in the older grouping.

In the 3-month group, many items will have emotional appeal, rather than practical value. Can you find a way of distributing those items of nostalgic value to family members who might want them? On the other hand, perhaps you have not

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used the item frequently because you have not explored all the possible options for use. Glass preserving jars can double as flower planters or storage for dry goods. Patio furniture can be moved into the family rumpus room. Larger cooking pots can be used to make larger batches of food, so that you can reduce food costs and preparation time, instead of cooking each day. Tools can be organized into a travelling tool chest that neighbours can share.

The one-month group clearly consists of items of some significance and value to you. Since you have already done a great deal of preliminary “weeding” throughout the prior nine steps of this program, many of the decisions as to what to keep and what to discard will already have been made. But now, you should have room in your storage units to do the next couple of rooms, following the same process as for the first three.

Whatever items remain are those that you feel are needed. Prepare a list or spreadsheet of each of those items, according to the category in which they fall. Be sure to put the date that you undertook this organizing step at the top of the list. Now, arrange all of the items in the storage units so that the items that you will need furthest down the road are at the back or bottom of the assortment.

In exactly one month, return to the list, and identify all those items that you had intended to use in the past month, but did not. Move them into the 3-

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month collection, and adjust your spreadsheet or list. If you used any of the items in the 3-, 6- or 12- month groups within the first month, you should consider re-categorizing those items.

On the 3 month anniversary of your organizing effort, re-evaluate the list as you did after one month, and move items from one category to the other as necessary. Any items that had originally been in the one-month group that still have not been used should be targeted for disposal. A word of caution here: do not use something in this group just because it is getting close to its discard date. That defeats the purpose of your minimalism targets, and indicates an emotional attachment to an item that may not be beneficial.

Within a year and a month, you should have been able to filter out a large number of items that you may have thought that you needed or wanted, and that you had felt that you needed to retain. This self-evaluation will assist you in discarding those items.

What we have done in this step is marry the process of mentally de-cluttering your life to the process of physically de-cluttering.

But, so long as the clutter remains accessible, it remains a temptation.

Once you have set aside those items that you infrequently use, rent a storage locker. And don't rent one near your home, Rent one across town, and rent one that is difficult to access. The best is

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one that is on the second level, and is small enough that you will have to jamb items into it. Put the key in your bank safety deposit box, even, if you dare.

By making access to these items difficult, you are less likely to casually retrieve them.

Gathering of our possessions in life is a slow, insidious process that occurs because of human nature. It is far less effort to simply allow stuff to accumulate than it is to constantly clean, sort and filter out the excess.

In school, we learned that a body at rest (inertia) tends to stay at rest, while a body in motion tends to stay in motion (momentum). That was a grade-school oversimplification, though. Eventually, gravity takes over, even where momentum is concerned. That is why there are no true perpetual motion machines. A more accurate description of the movement principles is that movement or lack of it will be maintained via the easiest route.

For humans, inertia is generally the easiest route. There is less energy spent not taking action than taking it. So, by storing the excess belongings in a difficult-to-access spot, we must work to get at them. If we allow them to sit on the coffee table, or on the closet storage shelf, we have an easy task if we want to get at them. Make it tough.

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The bonus is that, once we have kept these superfluous items out of sight for a period of time, we lose our psychological dependence on them, and we are more likely to be able to dispose of them permanently.

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ANY FRIEND OF MINE

Relationship issues naturally seem to follow a decision to make a major change in one's life. After a divorce or marriage, for example, your network of friends is significantly altered.

When a career change hits, it impacts on more than the person whose work path is redirected. It impacts on a spouse, on family members, and on one's social life.

Similarly, a change of residence means school & friendship reorientation for the children, a probable job change for a spouse, and a shuffling of extended family interactions due to distance.

Obviously, a change of religion brings unique relationship realignments.

My decision to live a minimalist lifestyle occurred well before my remarriage. My spouse has done an amazing job of adjusting, accommodating and even aligning her value systems to meet my preferences. As I indicated, though, in one of my earlier comments, I felt compelled to live as a "closet minimalist," in order to maintain my image as a successful business consultant. That changed when I retired.

The most difficult relationship adjustment has come, not from those immediate family members such as my own children and my spouse, but from "extended family" and friends. Even my "new" children (a friend calls them "bonus children." I love that expression!), after a couple of years,

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learned to accept that my value system was not something they should try to leverage or modify, in the same manner that I respected their way of looking at life. We share ideas, but do not strong-arm our ideas on each other.

My new in-laws love to give gifts; for Christmas, at Easter, at every birthday and anniversary. Regardless of how I protest, they simply laugh it off. Regardless of how I try to encourage them to, at least, spend less (they are in their late 70s), they ignore the requests. So how do I get them to understand that I do not want these excesses, without being exceptionally blunt and perhaps offend them?

Long-time friends of my spouse, and friends of mine who love to socialize with us insist on bringing dinner gifts for every occasion. They remember special occasions, and provide gifts. They look at our dearth of furnishings, and bring knickknacks and superfluous decorations. Yet, they all know my preferences. So, how do I deal with them?

A simple solution: let everyone know you appreciate their thoughts and generosity, but let them know, each time they bring a gift, who or what charity you will be donating their gift to. Let them know how valued those donations are by the recipients. Let them know that, regardless of their attempt to “fatten me up” while I am on my minimalism diet, I will continue to appreciate their generosity, and thank them for their charitable

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nature by giving gifts that they know I will prudently donate to the appropriate charities.

How your friends and family respond to your choice of a minimalist lifestyle can bring many challenges.

There is a similarity here to the vegetarian who is invited to a dinner gathering. Does not eating meat insult the host, or does providing a poor selection of vegetarian options insult the guest? The answer should be, “neither.” Unfortunately, people are emotional creatures and seem prone to being offended.

Some of my friends are driven by the need to acquire wealth. They are still friends, in spite of our different philosophies. I have political leanings that focus more on social responsibility. Yet, other friends have strong conservative values. I have friends who are Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and atheist. Yet, I do not reject them because of our differences. In many ways, it is their differences that I find magnetic, and I continually learn from them.

However, others prefer to congregate only with people of like mind. That is their option. It is quite likely that former friends that love what you perceive to be the excesses of life will drift away from you. Be prepared for that possibility.

Fortunately, converting to minimalism is nothing like converting to Satanism, or becoming an urban militant. Few find the change sufficiently off-putting to reject a former friend. Those that do, in

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my opinion, weren't worthy of friendship in the first place.

There really are only two issues that arise regarding friends and acquaintances.

The first is simple. If you are employed, for instance, as an investment broker or own a high-end furniture store, your image is built upon economic and material wealth, and you will be expected to live the lifestyle. However, it is also true that you are far less likely to become a minimalist if that is your chosen career path, anyway!

Being or becoming a minimalist is reasonable in some, but not in all circumstances. If you are engaged in an industry that relies on markers of affluence to gauge or drive your success, you will likely need to delay becoming a minimalist until your work environment is different. Be prepared to set aside major components of your reduction strategy, to accommodate the "needs" of your circle of business acquaintances.

The second issue is the good intentions of friends. I have described that problem in the earlier discussion regarding gift-giving in-laws. That is, there may be an unwillingness of some people to accept that you have chosen this way of living.

When my parents died, my brother, a bachelor, was left to own and maintain the family home. From the day of the funeral to almost a year later, he was flooded with well-wishing, compassionate relatives and family friends (mostly female), all of

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whom brought him meals on china plates, surplus dishware, cooking utensils and flatware. He had enough food to last him for three months, and enough china to last him a year. He needed none of it, but all of the women assumed he needed their care, and food and kitchenware was the way to provide it. A few even attempted to clean his house for him.

Garry kept none of the dishes, pots or cutlery, except for a couple of each. The items simply were excess to him. Unfortunately, the relatives were unwilling to believe him, and inundated him with their version of a solution to his sadness at losing our parents.

They all meant well. They were all attempting to solve my brother's problems based on the solutions that they themselves, may have wanted. The problem with your friends' reaction to your new, Spartan way of living is that they will, in large measure, be unwilling to accept that this is the way you have chosen, and that you are not living more economically through preference but through need. In other words, your friends are most likely to "over-friend" you! Be prepared.

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ONE PART OF YOUR LIFE

I have suggested earlier that “going minimal” should not be undertaken in the manner of the crash dieter, but that point bears repeating.

Minimalism should not take over your life. Rather, it should be a style of engaging with life, and, as such, should be approached steadfastly but not aggressively.

One of my sons approaches life with such zest that he is almost out of control. In part, that is due to the enthusiasm of youth. In the past four years he has owned four vehicles, lived in five residences, invested in two complete sets of snowboarding equipment (even though he had not snowboarded prior to his first purchase), travelled to Jamaica, Los Angeles, Las Vegas (several times), Banff, Lake Louise, numerous skiing trips, three outdoor music festivals, dozens of lakeside parties, and so on. He lives, not off his credit cards, but on the overdrafts.

His zeal for enjoying first, analysing second, is epitomized in a purchase that he made prior to buying his second vehicle. At the time, he had no car, and his credit rating was far from perfect. Yet, he was so optimistic about his ability to buy another vehicle on credit that he arrived home with a very expensive sound system, in a box, for the vehicle that he did not even own! THAT is embracing life without hesitation.

As much as I enjoy his enthusiasm, his approach

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is extremely dangerous. Fortunately, until now, luck has been with him. Few of us would be so lucky.

As a minimalist, you will be approaching life almost at 180 degrees from my son. Instead of acquiring possessions, you will be divesting yourself of them. That, by definition, requires more prudent choices.

I urge you to embrace minimalism, but do so one piece, one day at a time, until you are immersed in the process. Begin at home, rather than at work (discussions of minimalism at work can be found in the Barebones Business chapter). Begin with those elements of your life and routine which are less impactful.

Most of us love our leisure, loathe our chores. For pure enjoyment, I recommend that you begin your new journey with those household duties that can be simplified or eliminated by going barebones.

Many of our kitchen appliances fall into that category. Similarly, many of our cleaning items, liquids and solvents could be consolidated or eliminated. These will be discussed in the chapter on eco-friendly ideas.

On the other hand, when you simplify, you may find that you have developed a love for gardening, or woodworking, or similar hobbies. Approach your acquisitions in this area gently, as well.

Getting rid of your material “wealth” is only one side of the equation. You already should have eliminated a substantial portion of your

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belongings, if you have proceeded according to the steps described in prior chapters.

It is time to begin the emotional and active portion of your adjustment. We'll start with dealing with cravings.

If you are a smoker, you'll immediately grasp the impact of this discussion. More specifically, if you have ever tried to quit, you'll understand the power of cravings.

One of my daughters gave up smoking last summer. She did not approach it gently. A three-pack-a-day smoker, she quit "cold turkey." (I wonder if it is something in the genes, with sons and daughters both throwing themselves into whatever new idea captures their interest.) Aside from the physiological stress that this decision placed on her system, the emotional stress was immense.

Cheryl tells me that the desire for cigarettes hits her often, even eight months after quitting. She frequently wakes up with a craving for a smoke.

My father-in-law quit smoking over thirty years ago. He says that he still had the urge to smoke years later.

So how do they deal with these powerful hungers? Both cite essentially the same solutions: they look at the alternatives.

For Cheryl, she did not want her almost-teen daughter to grow up thinking that smoking was okay. She also saw the impact on her own health. While she did not anticipate this corollary effect,

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she found that, once she quit, she could actually taste her food!

“I found out that some of the foods that I thought tasted great actually tasted horrible. They were too salty.” She also feels better, health-wise, and about herself in general.

My father-in-law had a different motivation. “I was paying over \$100 a month for smokes (in the 1970s), and I wanted to make sure I didn’t take food out of my family’s mouth.” He, too, quit cold turkey.

Cravings are overpowering, and the only realistic way to overcome them without chemical (drug) treatment is to mentally adjust.

Brendan Brazier, in his book, *The Thrive Diet*, discusses the impact and causes of cravings. He dispels the myths surrounding cravings, and makes a case for ignoring them.

Cravings, contrary to popular belief, are not the body’s way of telling you that something is missing from your diet. It is your mind’s way of convincing you that it wants what it has become accustomed and adapted to. There is absolutely no need for sugary treats and drinks in your diet, yet your body feels that there is, if you have been consuming them regularly.

In the same way that foods, or coffee, or tobacco cravings attempt to draw you into a cycle of consumption and overconsumption, excesses of material goods, on which we have come to depend, attempt to tell us that we need them.

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If you doubt this statement, try to put down your cell phone for a day. Don't turn it off. Just endure the beeps that tell you that there is an incoming text message. Turn a deaf ear to the ring that tells you that someone is calling. See if those cravings don't lure you like a siren.

When I moved temporarily to the city, upon my marriage in 2005, one of the easiest urges that I dealt with was the ring of the doorbell. My wife, on the other hand, could not resist answering the door, even when she had seen the two familiar strangers walking up the sidewalk with religious tracts in their hands. She was unable to resist the need to answer the telephone at dinner, even when the call display showed that it was a telemarketer. She cursed that they were calling, but still answered.

Fortunately, today, few people ring our yurt doorbell, and she has developed an immunity to answering frivolous phone calls.

Compulsive cravings are difficult to overcome. First, you have to recognize them for what they are. The craving to have a glass of water on a hot day after strenuous exercise is rational, real and should not be ignored. The craving for a shot of whisky at 2 pm while at work probably should be.

Some cravings are justifiable. Many are not. The craving for television is one of them, as is the need for the daily dessert at your favourite restaurant. The addiction to Internet surfing of X-rated sites is probably an unhealthy urge. The

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strong desire to read the daily newspaper likely is not.

Regardless, however, whether the cravings are healthy or unhealthy, they are strong. It is your choice as to which one or ones you will deal with.

Do not attempt to throw out every desire, want or urge, simply because you want to simplify. Indeed, the huge void that such an action will create will cause such stress that you will be unlikely to be able to maintain that new level of denial.

The healthiest way to approach minimalism is like the new long distance runner. He does not attempt to run the full 26 miles of the marathon, at full speed, on the first day. Rather, he builds up his stamina and endurance, and conditions himself. Yes, he probably would prefer to be able to “give it his all” on the first day, but he knows better. The professional football player, on the first day of training camp, does not participate as if he were in the middle of the regular season. He builds, each day, on the successes and hard work of the precious day, until he is ready. Then he enjoys the challenge of all-out competition.

My daughter and father-in-law both have successfully defied the conventional wisdom regarding dealing with cravings, and have sustained their successes. They are the exceptions, rather than the rules.

Commence your new life by eliminating or dramatically reducing only one of the activities that

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you want to discard from your lifestyle. Endure the initial cravings, and then enjoy the ultimate success. Then attack another craving that you want to discard, and so on. But each time you eliminate one activity from your “diet,” see if there is a more healthy choice with which to fill this new void.

Minimalism is not an extreme lifestyle choice, contrary to conventional opinion. It is a choice of moderation and balance, giving up that which is unnecessary in order to more fully enjoy that which is healthy and beneficial in the long run.

Be judicious, as well, in what you determine to be undesirable and unneeded. Do not give up all your books, because they represent a sort of material wealth. Do not give up television entirely, if your primary use of it was educational and beneficial. Do not relinquish something of significance to the rest of the family, merely because you feel it is something that you can eliminate. Be balanced. Be selective. And take the process one step, one day at a time.

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MONITOR & MEASURE

The last three steps of the 15-step minimalism process focus on passive efforts, and the do's and don'ts of your daily life.

Monitoring and measuring, to be sure, are not chores that we embrace eagerly. However, consider this step to be short term, and look at it like a bathroom scale for a diet program. The best way to know if you are moving in the right direction is to step back and evaluate.

There are three components to this evaluation. The first is an analysis of the actual possessions that you have been able to free yourself from. This is similar to noting the pounds you have shed, even though the purpose of your weight loss regimen was to become more healthy. Measuring what you have discarded is a tangible indication of the decreased reliance on material things.

The second component is a measurement of with what you have replaced those belongings. We do not live life in a vacuum. When we give up a reliance on material goods that we have used or based our being upon, we leave behind a hole. That hole may be an emotional one – a longing for that which we have discarded – or a physical one. If we have, for instance, given up our television addiction, with what have we replaced it?

By monitoring what we have lost and what we have substituted, we will more accurately be able to gauge our success at going barebones.

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The third measure is the most vital. We should be able to reflect on whether we have achieved a measure of happiness and contentment by choosing a less cluttered way of living. The primary purpose of becoming a minimalist should have been to improve our life.

If you find that you have incurred excess stress, or are suffering because of your choices, you should re-consider your actions. Ask yourself if there is another option to provide that avenue of contentment.

Stress is, simply, a killer. Unhappiness and stress are related. If you have increased your stress level dramatically as a consequence of adopting the minimal way of living, consider changes. Consider, as well, that this tradition may not be suited to you.

It is far more likely, though, that you will be able to demonstrate to yourself, tangibly, that minimalism has provided you with the chance to live life to the maximum, and that without the jumble of possessions surrounding you, you are more able to grasp at the opportunities for growth and self-improvement that present themselves.

Having evaluated your status, set new goals for yourself. Look to avenues and opportunities that you had been unable to embrace prior to your conversion, and explore how you will be able to fill your life in a more self-satisfying manner, without being self indulgent.

By measuring and monitoring your progress (or

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lack of it) regularly, you will be able to further refine this chosen was of sentient living.

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SPONGEBOB'S PHILOSOPHY

Friends of ours were boasting about their recent vacation to New York. Being from a small urban centre in the Midwest, a holiday in this megalopolis sounded exciting.

They proceeded to recount all of the activities in which they had engaged, all of the places they visited, all of the stores at which they had shopped, all of the landmarks and tourist spots they had seen. It sounded like an extremely busy two weeks. Unfortunately, they had forced all of these events into a four-day trip.

Many people vacation like that. So too, do many people live their lives in that manner. Life should be enjoyed, for certain. But how much pleasure do you derive from always being “on the go,” and only being able to experience things on a most superficial level.

In an old MASH episode, Major Winchester is shown relaxing in his tent, savouring classical music. It is an odd setting, being in the middle of a war, with death and chaos raining down on you, yet finding the time to eat up those moments that you value.

You have expended a great deal of time, energy, physical and mental effort to de-clutter your life, so that you may more fully enjoy the moments of both simplicity and complexity. You did not embark on this journey just so you could hold a garage sale and sell your life's markers away. No, you did so,

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because you felt that the minimal way of life would also provide you with an enhanced experience. You were right.

But, now that you have achieved your objective, shouldn't you be looking at ways to explore how to wring that last drop of pleasure out of life? Volunteer, with your newly discovered free time. Spend a little on learning new things. Invest in sharing moments with others, learning from them.

Three years ago, my wife and I were camping in a pristine park in Manitoba – Hecla Island. Aside from its fantastic shorelines, pristine woodlands, energizing weather, diverse wildlife and peaceful parklands, Hecla had spiders. Most places do, of course. But I had never considered that I might, one day, be spending my afternoon watching a spider. Nor had I contemplated that my wife would eagerly consume two hours doing the same.

Yet, on a gorgeous afternoon, there we were, crouched near a spider web attached to the wall, watching as it encased a hornet that had strayed into the web.

At first, it was unclear whether the silk was sufficiently strong to hold this prey. For several minutes, it seemed as if the hornet was more resilient than the mesh, and it nearly broke loose several times.

We watched with interest. But so did the spider.

Although I had seen spiders immediately attack a fly or gnat caught in a web, this spider hesitated.

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Tentatively, it would proceed a few steps onto the web infrastructure, toward the insect caught in the silk. Then it would retreat, and wait a few moments. It, too, seemed unsure as to whether its trap would hold the prey.

After about fifteen minutes, the spider became emboldened, and moved near to the hornet. The hornet still struggled vigorously, butt clearly was unable to free itself. As it twisted and turned, the spider moved cautiously around it.

After another ten minutes or so, it darted in toward the head of the hornet, and seemed to nip at it like a yappy dog nips at your heels. In a fraction of a second, it darted away, before the hornet could invert itself with stinger toward the spider. Then the spider waited a few minutes.

We waited, as well, and watched.

The spider attacked the head again, and, just as quickly, was out of reach of that deadly tail. In a span of twenty minutes, the spider nipped at the hornet's head ten times or so, each time being in less of a hurry to retreat. The hornet flipped and contorted each time, in vain attempt to launch its own counterattack against the spider.

The spider venom and the extreme effort exerted by the hornet inevitably took its toll, and the insect struggled less and less.

As the hornet exhausted itself, the spider began the pedantic (for it) process of cocooning its lunch in a silk bag. By the time two hours had passed, the hornet no longer struggled, and the spider had

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all but finished encasing its meal.

That afternoon, for us, could not have been better spent. It was an exciting (but slow-moving) interaction with primal nature.

Such a moment may not appeal to you. Yet, it illustrates how you can savour the most enjoyable moments in life, with no expense.

Minimal living affords hundreds of opportunities for you to engage with life. Those chances would not present themselves if your life remained cluttered with things, instead of moments.

You have achieved something remarkable: You have given yourself the prospect of being able to gather a richness in your life without an expense.

Soak it up.

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STEER CLEAR OF THE PULPIT

Do you know an ex-smoker? How about a former heavy person who has lost a lot of weight? Or a friend who has just discovered his own version of religion? Then, there is the self-made financial success, who grew up in poverty.

Remember, for a moment, the impact that that person had on you, whenever you encountered them. Recall how the smoker railed at “that filthy habit” whenever he saw someone else puffing away.

Draw up your memory of that dieter, who never passed on an opportunity to express his disgust at the overweight person who “doesn’t have the willpower to push himself away from the table.”

Or, the new zealot, who knows all the answers as to why his God is great, and yours is the way to hell.

Self-made financial successes commonly brag about their own industriousness, and critique the slothful ways of those still living in poverty.

I only bring up these four stereotypes to highlight how you may be perceived, if you are overly zealous about your minimalist discovery.

Choosing to “go minimal” is an individual choice. It is not for everyone. It has its drawbacks and shortcomings, as well. Recognize that, while this standard may be perfect for you, it may not suit others. And avoid, at all costs, preaching and sermonizing. It is unattractive!

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That's it. You've completed your fifteen steps. I would offer you a diploma, but that would just be material excess, wouldn't it?

In the following chapters, I provide a little bit of a bonus (or a little bit of waste, depending on your point of view). Now that you have a framework for living the simple life, take a look at a few of the options available to make it an easy, enjoyable and simple life, from energy efficiency to sustainability concepts, from building your own yurt to running your business as a minimalist.

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WILDCRAFTING

Wildcrafting is the harvesting of food and materials from the wild. It may be the ultimate in minimalism and environmental responsibility at the same time. I have been wildcrafting for more than fifty years, since I was a child. Back then, it was through necessity. Today, it is for the personal experience and satisfaction.

Across North America, in almost every corner of the continent, we could easily harvest enough food to survive, year round.

In my part of the world – Manitoba, Canada – winter temperatures reach prolonged lows of -35 to -40 degrees (the same in Celsius as Fahrenheit). Yet, even in the dead of this harsh winter, we have spruce buds, dried goldenrod, ripened rose hips, hawthorn and mountain ash berries, cattail roots, tansy seeds, wild clover stalks and a dozen other plants that can be cooked to provide nutritious, if not tasty meals.

In summer, the plethora of plants allows for a diverse and healthy diet, without ever having to plant a seed.

Many of the plants and herbs that are accessible also have medicinal properties.

Unfortunately, the huge array of plants and the ranges across which they grow make discussions of their harvest and use extremely cumbersome. Instead, I recommend that you visit our blogs <http://eatingwild.blogspot.com/> or

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<http://leanandgreenliving.blogspot.com/> for more in-depth discussions of the variety of herbs, spices and edible plants available, how to identify them and how to use them. In true minimalist fashion, access to these blogs is free.

In addition to tapping into a free source of food, wildcrafting is a fantastic leisure activity that also provides you with the exercise that each of us need.

BUILDING A YURT

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the design, a yurt is a tent-like home, used by the Mongols in the Himalayas for several thousands of years. Developed to withstand the harsh climate and fierce winds in the high mountains, the yurt is a sturdy, time-tested structure, perfect for its intended use.

A traditional yurt is a felt and animal hide structured tent, in which the Mongols (and other groups in the Asian mountain chains) live year-round. Modern yurts are constructed of lattice, space-age insulation and polycarbonate tarpaulins.

BC Yurts, a Canadian manufacturer of these innovative antique structures, claims that they are liveable – indeed, comfortable – at temperatures below -35C. Their round shape allows winds to flow aerodynamically around them, with little wind resistance and, consequently, reduced wind chilling effect. Their 30-degree sloped domes allow snow loads to slide off like an avalanche. Because they are constructed as a single, large room, air flow is free, reducing heating demand. In summer, the dome skylight and screened windows allow such good ventilation that, on the hottest day, these houses are quite comfortable.

When my wife and I decided to construct a yurt in which we would live, I spent months working on a design that would be ideal for us.

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Our friends understood. “Trust Bob,” they said, “to find the perfect idea that has been unrivalled for scores of generations of Mongols, and then to try to make it better.”

I’m not suggesting that we did so. I am saying that we came up with a system much more suited to our own environment that cost significantly less than the commercialized versions that were available on the market in North America. We saved material and money, but invested more time in its construction.

Our yurt is a hybrid, employing eco-friendly design with the principles of minimalism and environmentalism.

Building my yurt opened a doorway to a new lifestyle. Ironically, by building a smaller structure than the previous three homes that we had lived in, we actually increased our available space, since it is one large room, divided by arrangements of the furniture.

In building the yurt, I made several adaptations, some of which were not particularly eco-friendly, but were sustainable.

For instance, I used oriented strand board (osb) to construct the wall panels. This is a product made from wood strips, glued together. Using this product is uncommon in yurt building, yet, it did two things. First, it satisfied a slight fear that my wife had expressed about the potential for hungry bears to rip through the tarpaulin fabric. They would be less likely to attempt to force their way

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through wood. Second, I already owned the osb, and was reusing this material, so it cost nothing more, and provided a sustainable factor through the reuse of the panelling.

I built the yurt using both a biomass heat system (outdoor wood furnace) and a backup propane system (3,500 btu heater), as well as a propane tankless water heater. This is particularly unfriendly to the environment, but our cooler climates made year-round solar water heating impractical. As well, it is our intention to use the outdoor wood furnace to heat our water next year, so the propane system is simply an interim solution.

The eco-friendly options are numerous, and include solar and wind power, a geothermal cooling network, natural lawn, passive air flow system, gray water recovery system, composting (biogas-producing) toilet, low-flow minimal use water consumption system, partially bermed location, greenery to keep the yurt cool, passive ground heat recovery, rainwater recovery loops, and so on.

Even so, our yurt is located over 900 yards off the nearest road and more than 2/3 mile from the nearest neighbour's house. It is surrounded by acres of bush, dozens of coyotes, a few wolves, a couple of bears, a half-dozen raccoons, almost twenty deer, badgers, skunks and other wild things too numerous to mention. It is my style of

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living, but my wife had been raised her entire life in the city.

So why would anyone give up a comfortable house in the city to live in a yurt in the bush? For me, the decision has more to do with enriching my life than it does with simplifying it. For my wife, it is an adventure.

But, why move to a yurt? A yurt is more a statement about reducing clutter, waste and excess than it is an actual reduction in lifestyle. A yurt is symbolic of true minimalism. It gives you more, for so much less. At a cost of under \$15,000 for a complete 800 square foot unit, it clearly minimizes the impact on the pocketbook, compared to typical 800 square foot homes or condominiums in Manitoba that cost upwards of \$125-190,000.

The one-room concept provides a great-room feel, with absolutely no wasted space, uncomfortable corners or hallways. As a result, one room provides the impact of a huge house. Minimal complexities of design and layout reduce cleaning and maintenance requirements. No hard walls means no painting. Open rooms minimize demand for lighting and heating infrastructure. Minimal infrastructure means minimal maintenance, and more time to enjoy life.

Our yurt is entirely “off the grid.” Our lavatory is a composting system – completely waterless. Our lighting is provided by a combination of wind and solar, with LED lights, and 90-watt refrigeration.

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Our cooking equipment will eventually consist of biogas-fuelled ovens and grills, while backup energy is provided courtesy of a biodiesel-fuelled generator. The gray water from the shower and sink is filtered through an eco-pond, and used to nourish our nearby garden.

All of this may sound a little *avante garde*, or even idealistic and unrealistic. However, our entire concept has been tested successfully, in various component prototypes. In fact, rather than being a little too idealistic, we believe that our move to reduce our environmental footprint and minimize our economic crater of consumption is a major enrichment of our lives.

This chapter is devoted to describing the process that we used to build our yurt. It is not the only design available, but it works, and works well.

In the first few months of the winter of 2009, with temperatures reaching -25C (-11F), we had to turn off our tiny 3,500 btu heater, because the yurt was too warm at night. We have reduced water consumption from an average of 400 or more litres to less than 70 litres per day, by using the water strategically but not frugally, reclaiming & reusing gray water, using only a hot water (set on the lowest setting) feed from the tankless heater for our shower, using a composting toilet that consumes less than 3 litres per flush, and, of course, showering together. (I did say that minimalism could be fun!). We watch television infrequently, but rely on a system of deep-cycle

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batteries to store the solar and wind energy we capture. We dry laundry in the fresh air, use LED lighting, a 12-volt water pump, a 12-volt fan for air movement and use reflective panelled insulation in the dark reaches of the bathroom to improve lighting. We are living minimally off the grid, yet have “sacrificed” almost nothing!

Yurt living certainly is not for everyone, but for those with the daring to attempt it, the lifestyle offers huge advantages. With no debts, no mortgage, yet a steady income, we have been able to redirect our money into areas that serve our preferences much more effectively.

So, for those of you with a yen for a yurt, here's how we built it.

Our yurt is designed with two exterior tarpaulin skins. The inner layer is a commercially available tarpaulin skin, intended to provide a secondary protection against rainfall, and a buffer to reduce the amount of friction of edges of the structure against the heavy-duty uv-protected tarpaulin. The tarpaulins were purchased from Cover-Tech (New Brunswick, Canada), who provided the lowest price quote for a 12 ounce tarpaulin. The two pieces were custom made, with the wall tarpaulin being 94 feet long and 7'6" high. The extra length will be used to lap over the doorway when we are away for long periods of time. The height exceed the height of the wall structure by six inches, to allow for overlap at the top of the wall framing (under the roof tarp) and excess

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length at the bottom to allow for water runoff and reduce inflow of cold air in winter. The roof tarp, too, was ordered at 30 feet in diameter, while the yurt was built to 28 feet. The extra foot around the perimeter provides enough material for us to create a partial awning over the windows, to deflect rain and snow.

A small problem occurred with the roof tarp that was easily remedied. The roofline angle (slope) was calculated at 30 degrees. However, after seaming, the tarpaulin was sewn at a 33 degree angle, and our rafter cuts were out by 2 degrees. As well, while the tarp is manufactured as a circle (cone), the yurt actually consists of 44 straight-edge sections. This resulted in a loose fit of the tarp. Normally, this would be a severe problem, as the flutter of the tarp in moderate winds would exacerbate the degrading of the tarpaulin. However, our roof vent design allowed us to snug the tarp over the vent frame, and use only one tuck of material around the entire cone area. Once the roof tarp was hoisted into place using pulleys and ropes, the wall tarp was erected, and the top edge snugged under the lower edge of the roof tarp. Using a series of ratchet tie-downs attached together, we tightened the straps around both the upper and lower perimeter of the wall tarps, holding the roof top securely against the wall tarp. To ensure that the roof tarp did not free itself from the tie-downs, polyester rope was threaded through the tarp eyelets, and the ratchet

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tie-downs fed through the rope loops. Lastly, we cut three-sided openings in the wall tarp for the windows and doorway (the fourth upper side was left uncut), retaining the material to use as a roll-down sunshade.

Once the walls of our yurt and the roof rafters were in place, there was a strong urge to apply the tarpaulins, just so we could see the “finished” product. However, several preliminary steps were required, to ensure that the treated fabric would last, that the building was wind- and rain-proof, and that the structural integrity was intact. Hurricane ties were installed on the outer end of each rafter, in addition to the two screws holding the rafter ends in place. Although wind resistance is minimized with the circular design, screws are insufficient to provide the strength needed, as screws have a tendency to shear. In fact, in most jurisdictions, screws are not acceptable, according to the Building Code, for framing.

Hurricane ties were also installed on the roof ring end of the rafters, as a secondary support for the six-inch bolts securing each inner rafter end. To reduce lateral sway, crossties were installed, earlier, at approximately the midway point of each rafter (see prior blog posts).

Where screws extruded from each plate joining the two-foot wall segments, the ends of the screws were treated with latex caulk, to reduce rub friction against the inner layer of tarpaulin.

At the top edge of the roof ring, we fastened a

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rubber edging, to prevent rubbing of the tarpaulin against the sharp edge of the ring. We used a rubber moulding from an old automobile windshield, fastened with roofing nails to the ring. Lastly, an inner layer of tarpaulin was secured around the perimeter and on the roof of the yurt. These tarpaulins provide an additional rain and barrier, but, more importantly, act as a buffer between the final, outer tarpaulin layer and the framing. The tarps cost less than \$90 each, and should extend the life of the outer tarpaulin by 3-5 years (a cost saving of more than \$1,600). Just as in conventional buildings, caulk was applied around the windows and door, and drip mould & j-channel framed the openings.

One additional feature that we incorporated into the design was a roof-top vent system, to improve air flow. This vent was constructed (see picture) of osb, and oriented in a north/south direction, so that the vent windows can be opened on either (or both) end(s) to maximize ventilation. In our next post, we will discuss finishing touches and exterior tarpaulin application. The following article will provide information on interior finishing stages. The last three articles will provide information on setting up our solar, wind & biomass energy systems, as well as our grey water recovery systems.

There is the easy way to build a yurt: seek out a quality supplier of yurt kits, select your options & size, and then make your purchase. There is a

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more difficult way to build a yurt: tour the yurt demonstrations of a variety of suppliers and build based on those model units. Then there is the road less travelled: design & build your own. This is the option my wife and I have chosen. Conventional, commercial yurt walls are constructed using lattice wrapped with pvc tarpaulin material. A thin aircraft cable is interlaced in the top openings of the latticework, and tightened using a turnbuckle. This structure holds the walls inward in a circle, while the weight of the rafters resting on the cable pushes the walls outward. Stasis, strength and stability thus are achieved.

Our wall structure begins with a 2*3 framework installed around the inside perimeter of a 24" by 84" piece of 7/16" thick oriented strand board. Since our yurt is twenty-eight feet in diameter, with a circumference of approximately eighty-eight feet, 44 sections are needed. Each section meets the next at an eight degree angle, requiring that one of the two vertical 2" by 3" studs is cut with an eight degree taper.

To lay out the bottom plate, forty-four 2-foot lengths of 2 by 3 are cut in a slight "vee" shape, at an eight degree angle, as well. Each wall segment will meet the next at the point of the "vee," with a one-foot extension extending into the adjacent section base. By fastening the wall to these bottom plate segments, a solid circular frame is created.

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As each section is placed standing adjoining the next, a top plate, identical to the bottom plate segment, is secured along the top 2" by 3" horizontal piece of the wall.

After making sure that all wall segments are vertically plumb, metal joining plates are fastened to join the segments at the top and bottom of each wall segment.

Next, windows and the main door are framed in place, in the same manner as a conventional wall and door or window buck are installed. For our yurt, we purchased the 7'6" high by 94' long tarpaulin from a New Brunswick supplier. The fabric intentionally was ordered longer than the actual circumference of the yurt, to allow for gathering and darts around the doors and windows.

Prior to installing the tarpaulin around the perimeter, window and door edges are caulked and sealed. Along the bottom of the wall segments, a strip of Velcro is fastened. The tarpaulin will extend one inch below the bottom of the wall, so that water will run off and away from the floor. After wrapping the tarp around the yurt walls and temporarily holding it in place, six 15-foot long ratchet tie-downs are connected and tightened along the upper perimeter of the walls, permanently fixing the wall tarp into place. Walls are now complete.

Attempting to try to live life a little differently from the "norm" is a lot like trying to outrun Usain Bolt

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while he is running the 100 yard dash and you are doing the hurdles. It is more than a challenge; it is a nightmare.

Lucky for us, when we began to plan the building of our yurt, we were aware of the myriad of building code, zoning and environmental issues that we had to overcome.

First, the building code. Although the universal building code is intended to provide a consistent standard of construction across Canada (and the USA), each jurisdiction is empowered to tinker with its specifics. In cities, of course, there is a need for consistency, to protect neighbours, to ensure fire risks are minimized and to protect future occupants of a home or building. Yet, each geographical area has its own challenges, so supplementary regulations are enacted. To a lesser degree, in rural settings, these standards are upheld.

However, the plethora of farm buildings that are constructed to meet unique needs – hay barns, cattle calving pens, machine sheds, etc. are hardly likely to become homes for families, so standards for outbuildings are less stringent. Many rural authorities turn a blind eye to poorly constructed shelters and outbuildings.

Nonetheless, innovative structures such as straw houses, bermed buildings and alternative design concepts are rejected by community planners. In fact, such a simple variation on a basement such as construction with pressure-treated lumber

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instead of concrete requires an engineer's stamp of approval.

Many authorities also require adherence (justifiably so!) to environmental regulations. Waste disposal is just one of these concerns. However, even the height of a wind turbine is regulated. Over a specific height will require an environmental site assessment, a permit, and appropriate lighting to warn off low-flying aircraft. This regulation is enforced, even in extremely remote environments, where many of the trees or geographical features exceed the height requirements for permitting.

We have made several concessions to our local authorities regarding construction standards. However, our design may still violate legal requirements. For instance, our interior walls are not fire-rated to the minimum one hour. It's hard to fire-rate a tarpaulin structure for that period! We have no holding tank. Not much need when we anaerobically digest our effluent, and use composting toilets. We do not have concrete piles to anchor our structure. It is overkill to anchor a structure that weighs about the same as a half-ton truck. Our bedroom does not have a regulation-sized escape window. On the other hand, our bedroom has no walls, and the rest of the yurt has four windows and a door. We have no electrical network that is inspected. Truth is, we have only a 12-volt power system with an inverter for some minor appliances, but a home does need wiring

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and plumbing, according to the building code. So, we do not have a home. Our yurt is a “temporary” structure, like a workshop or barn, not intended to live within. At least, that is how our municipality sees it. I look forward to spending my retirement years living in my barn, thank you!

One of the goals for which we aimed with our decision to move to a yurt was to reduce our energy consumption.

Yurts, being round, offer reduced heating costs per square foot of floor space because the air is able to circulate readily. Conversely, cooling is more effective due to the open design. This element of the yurt layout, of course, helps to cut energy consumption.

Our heating system is an outdoor wood furnace (in contemporary language, a “biomass converter”), which supplies heat to the greenhouses, workshop and yurt. The furnace design has been modified to enable us to do most of our cooking on top of the unit, to eliminate the need for an indoor electric or propane range. Supplementary cooking will be done in a toaster oven.

Rather than use a 240V well pump and pressure system to provide water, we will be using a modified 2-cycle engine-driven water pump to pump water from the well to overhead cistern units above the kitchen sink and bathroom area. Separate 20-liter sprayer tanks will be used to provide water spray necessary for hand washing, compost toilet cleaning and dish spraying. The

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shower head is a “rain shower” head, fed by gravity-driven water from the overhead cistern. Water is heated by the outdoor wood furnace and solar heat.

We have given away our refrigerator, along with our electric stove. The refrigerator, although energy efficient, was far larger than what two people required. In its place, we have purchased a 90-watt bar fridge (with small freezer compartment), and a half-sized, 60-watt bar fridge. The small unit will be used only when we absolutely require it (less than 25% of the time). Our major concern was our lighting. Although individual lighting consumes relatively small amounts of energy, a person tends to neglect to turn off lights, to use too much lighting, or to use lighting that is too bright for the task at hand. To charge my laptop, I plug it into a power inverter plugged into the car’s cigarette lighter. By laying a white light-duty panelling over the interior walls, we reduce the need for lighting. Four 18’ x 48” mirrors are placed around the perimeter to reflect light, as well. We “traded in our three halogen floor lamps (250 watts each) for three \$25 credits on energy efficient lights (thanks to our local electric company!). Now, our entire lighting consists of a 5-arm floor lamp with 13-watt CFLs, 20 solar lights marking our exterior entrance and walkway, one 20-watt Xenon puck light over the entrance inside the yurt, and four plug-in LED light packs, producing as much light, each, as a 150

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watt incandescent bulb, but drawing a total of 4 watts of energy for all of them. Our only other energy costs are costs to charge our cellular telephone (we have eliminated the landline), and our energy-efficient LCD television (used a maximum of 1 hour per day). Total energy consumption is projected to be the equivalent of \$4.00 per month (we use solar power, so there is no grid cost), compared to an average of \$60 per month in our former home.

To design my yurt and decide whether to purchase a ready-made kit or build from scratch, I first have to decide on the appropriate size. Do I build a yurt the same size as a normal house, do I build the same size as a typical apartment, or do I build a yurt sized like a tent?

Because my wife and I will be the only people living in this Mongolian tent, we decided to scale our unit like that of an apartment, rather than a house. For a one-bedroom apartment, average sizes run from 460 sq. Ft. To 600 sq. Ft., while a typical house will be at least double that size for a 1- or 2-bedroom residence.

But there are other considerations in making the decision on size. In a house or apartment, hallway space takes up about 5-10% of a typical home. In a yurt, there are no hallways. In an average house, as much as 15% of the space is consumed by unusable corners, clear space around entranceways and stairways. Again, there are no corners, no stairs and minimal need for

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entranceways, since the yurt will have a “great room” design. So, if you want the equivalent of a 2-bedroom apartment for space, reduce your yurt size by 25%. That brings a 2-bedroom unit down to around 600 sq. Ft.

Because yurts have no interior support walls, and a framework considerably lighter than a conventional house, clear spans need to be considered. Most North American yurt suppliers offer maximum sizes up to 30-32 feet in diameter. This size, it appears, is the maximum area to ensure solid structural design.

We have decided on a 28 foot diameter (605 sq ft) structure, since we anticipate little need for a large second bedroom, and we wish to enjoy maximum space for many indoor activities during the cold winter months.

There are a half-dozen quality yurt suppliers in Canada and the USA, with \Colorado Yurts and Yurtco being , in our view, the premier suppliers. On a 30-foot unit, prices begin at \$7,800, with costs rising to more than \$18,000 once additional features such as extra insulation, domes, roof supports, long-life fabric, upgraded windows, etc. are added in. While this is significantly less than the cost of a new home of a comparable size (\$32,000 -80,000), it is a price that can be significantly reduced if you construct your own yurt. In fact, the design which we settled upon can be constructed for well under \$6,000!

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Although yurts are considerably lighter than conventional houses, there still is considerable weight to the materials, and the proper support structures need to be in place.

Many yurts are built as elevated structures, either in total or in part, since many are built in locations with considerable slopes. There is a tendency to construct these units on simple 4*4 stilts, with little regard to lateral rigidity. Additionally, when yurts are built on platforms or raised decks, they alter the wind flow in, around and under the building. This practice also exacerbates drainage and snow build-up issues, as moisture tends to flow more freely under the building.

The primary consideration should be to structural integrity. Merely walking on a platform or deck that is held up by 4*4 posts causes the building to vibrate. Like the harmonic effect of a bridge structure swaying in the wind (or a child's swing being propelled on larger and larger arcs), this rhythmic motion can increase in intensity, causing the supports to break loose over time. Cross supports should be used, in addition to ties to hold the structure caps tightly to joists or beams. Ensure that you have placed a sufficient number of stilts along the length and breadth of the platform, to prevent sag.

Wind flow can be a very serious concern for yurt design. A moderate wind, funnelled beneath the yurt, may billow, like the air beneath a parachute canopy. This air flow has a detrimental effect on

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heating & cooling, as well. Yurts are designed to allow for easy air flow around and over the structure, and were never designed to allow for air flow beneath.

The third concern is moisture redirection. Allowing snow load to build up under your yurt will result in high moisture content in the spring, and the contingent possible decay or mould formation on the underside of the structure. Allowing water and snow melt to drain freely under the platform, as well, will contribute to the undermining of the earthen base on which deck posts rest. This, in turn, decreases structural integrity. You should install a water redirection system on the upper edge of the yurt platform, and redirecting barriers in a lead position on each deck support leg. This will minimize the risk of water erosion. Just because yurts are considered as an “alternative” to conventional housing does not imply that improper or inadequate construction techniques should be employed. Care in design, construction and maintenance of your yurt supporting network is a critical to building integrity as it is in conventional housing.

ENERGY SIMPLICITY

This chapter will explore ways that you can simplify energy use patterns, in your home, in your car and on vacation. It is not a discussion on eco-friendly concepts and innovative design, but, instead, a forum for looking at simple reduction and saving principles. In the next chapter, I offer a variety of novel (and time-tested) eco-friendly ideas.

One of the corner posts of a more simplistic lifestyle is a more passive approach to interacting with your surroundings. I am not referring to how you engage your environment, but how you utilize. A well-lived minimalistic lifestyle makes the best possible use of your surroundings, without aggressively consuming it.

Over the years, for example, I have incorporated numerous strategies into how I use energy, how I involve myself with my accommodations, and how I adjust to my surroundings, so that they can work with me, rather than me forcing my demands on them.

This year, my wife and I constructed a yurt, in which we live year round in the extreme variations of a Manitoba sequence of seasons. Yet, we live “off the grid,” have reduced water consumption by over 90%, and heat our home with a “near-zero” carbon footprint.

We do not deprive ourselves of comfort, as is the

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perception of environmentalists who live off the grid. So how did we adjust, so that we maximize our benefit while minimizing our intervention into the environment? By employing a couple of basic principles, we have reduced our consumption, while maintaining our benefit.

The first concept is simple to understand, simple to employ: rearrange your life to consume without waste.

Our lighting consists of three sets of LED lights. Prior to moving to our yurt, we had already reduced our energy consumption used for lighting by replacing old fluorescents and incandescent lights with CFLs. These lights use one quarter of the energy of a conventional bulb, and last longer. However, a high-quality led light uses only 1.5 watts (at 110v) while producing the equivalent of 60 watts of incandescent lighting. From using ten 60-watt bulbs to using ten 1.5 watt bulbs for an average 5 hours per day, our consumption would have dropped a total of 2,250 watts per day (roughly 2.2 kw) or 821 kw per year. That, in itself, is not quite equal to 5% of the typical home's energy.

By breaking up our lighting zones into task, aesthetic and non-task areas, we were able to re-direct energy use devoted to lighting. For example, we need good light over our kitchen island, for food preparation and cooking. But, by opening up the kitchen, dining areas and living areas into a great room concept that direct task

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lighting serves as indirect, non-task lighting for travel pathways. Our aesthetic lighting is generated naturally, through proper placement of windows, but also through the use of mirrors, reflective ceiling materials, and light-coloured walls in the living areas.

Developing lighting zones means that you can devote more or less intensive lighting to areas that have lower or higher demands. To make the creation of lighting zones more efficient, simply reorganize the layout of your living spaces to be more amenable to reduced lighting.

Using three-way switches also allows a homeowner to more easily shut off lights as he or she moves from one room to another. It is the inconvenience (as simple as it sounds) of walking across a darkened room that deters some of us from bothering to turn off a living room light as we move to the bathroom, bedroom or hallway, for example.

One of the most commonly “wasted” lights is the porch or front step light. Its only use is to light the way as you enter the home. By using solar lights strategically placed, the need for 100v bulbs is minimized. Timers often are employed strategically to reduce energy consumption. However, the addition of an apparently redundant gadget runs contrary to the principles of minimalism, since human forethought could easily replace indolence.

Blinds and drapes most often are viewed as

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lighting “supplements, allowing light in when needed. However, their best use is as heat sinks. Heat sinks are places or objects where heat can be retained and/or dissipated. Best known in electronics, heat sinks have gained in popularity as energy storehouses.

In hot, arid climates, where there is a wide variation between day and night temperatures, earthen berms or concrete & rock structures have been used to “capture” the sun’s heat during the day, and then slowly release it at night. In properly oriented homes, concrete or sand-filled inner walls, visible only in low-horizon sun situations (such as fall and winter in northern climates), capture sunlight & heat through open-curtained windows, and slowly release that heat at night.

But we have employed a slightly more innovative way to capture sunlight in winter and reflect it during the summer. Simply by using reversible heavy drapes, with a reflective (white) lighter material surface on one side and a dark fabric surface on the other, we are able to reflect sunlight away during the summer, while heat is absorbed during the cooler winter months. There is no extra cost for this simple installation, yet we calculate that we are able to save the equivalent of 300-600 watts of heat energy each day.

A yurt is designed for efficient flow of air, inside and out. During a recent strong blizzard, we felt absolutely no air movement inside this round

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structure, while the wind swirled intensely outside. The round design smoothly redirects the wind, instead of bearing the brunt of the wind's force. Inside, heat tends to move into all reaches of the yurt, with no dead air corners or alcoves. As a result, less energy is needed to heat the home.

Applying this principle to your living space will dramatically reduce energy consumption. Begin by moving your furnishings away from walls. Minimize dead corners and spaces, by leaving space under your beds for air movement, and reduce artificial walls created by entertainment units, wardrobes, and so on. In short, reorient your layout for maximum airflow.

This can be achieved both passively and actively, by means other than furniture rearrangement.

Forced air furnaces move air well when the registers are adjusted properly. Unfortunately, few homeowners bother to adjust the vent openings, resulting in some rooms that are always too hot and others than are too cold. The easiest approach is to close off the flow to vents nearest the furnace and open those farthest from it. Those remote vents usually are the ones located on outer walls.

Opening and closing windows on the appropriate sides of the home, and at the most appropriate times can reduce both heating and air conditioning costs.

In summer, windows on the upper floor, on the sun side (if it is windy, on the leeward side),

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should be opened partially to allow warm air (which rises) to be drawn out. Curtains should be mostly closed, with the reflective side facing out. Open the windows on the north side, lower floors, to allow cool air to enter. In winter, a slightly open window on the sun side upper floor will encourage air movement that allows warm upper air to circulate.

If you have ceiling fans, be sure that the fans rotate in different directions during the summer in contrast to the winter months, with air being drawn upward in summer (this is counterintuitive) and pushed downward in winter. In winter season, speed should be set on the slowest setting. While in the summer, a slightly faster rotation is best.

Another passive heat saving technique is to cook only in the evening during hot months, but as early as possible during the winter dinner preparation. This saves on cooling costs in the summer and heating costs in the winter.

Several years ago, one of my clients complained that he was paying exorbitant amounts for his restaurant's energy bills. The very first change that I recommended was that he reset his thermostats for air conditioning and heating. His problem? He had set his air conditioning to activate at 72F, and to cut out at 70F. He had also set his heat to shut off at 71F. Consequently, his air conditioning ran almost constantly, while his heat only shut off for a few minutes while the air conditioning was recovering. Effectively, but

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inefficiently, he was running both his heat and air conditioning at the same time, doubling his energy costs. Set your thermostat so that there is a wide “rest” period between the heat or the air conditioning engaging and shutting off.

Years ago, I learned that a full fridge saves energy. By keeping the refrigerator full, whenever the door is opened, less cooled air escapes, since there is less “loose” air available. If you prefer to store less food, simply fill several boxes with loose material, and place them in the fridge to occupy empty space!

We replaced our full-sized fridge with two bar-sized refrigerators. When there is a need, we have sufficient space between the two to more than meet our needs. When we do not require the space, we simply shut down one unit, and rely on the 90-watt small unit. It is amazing how much easier it is to conserve space, when you put all those condiments and leftovers into stackable plastic tubs.

Are you tempted to invest in an air ionizer, air freshening sprays and other knick knacks to get rid of stale air? Try growing a collection of fresh herbs in a sunny window during the winter. You'll save money on herbs, use the plant pots as heat sinks to collect the sun's winter heat, freshen the air, and add extra oxygen (while drawing out excess CO₂) to your environment.

In the part of the country where we live, water is an abundant resource. Many of the homes

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around us rely on artesian wells as a source of drinking and bathing water, and many farmers allow the water to flow freely for their livestock. Yet, in many parts of the world, water is a scarcity. We decided that, even though we have a natural spring on our property, we would look to ways to minimize our consumption. Just because it is there, we don't have to use it!

Instead, we set up a small (100 gallon) storage tank, and have reduced our daily water consumption to the equivalent of less than one bathtub full per day.

When we shower, as soon as we have rinsed, or lathered, we shut off the water flow. By reducing our hot water settings on the tankless system, we are able to run the hot water feed only, further reducing demand. We brush our teeth using a half cup of water, instead of running that water continuously. I shave immediately after running dish water, so that the water in the lines does not cool down. We have employed a half dozen other water-saving techniques, described elsewhere in this book.

Are we suffering? Far from it! But, thinking "conservation" allows us to use our abundant resources minimally.

"Going minimal" is possible in your automobile, as well. Simple adjustments, such as charging your cell phone in your car instead of your house, will reduce energy costs. Directing air through the upper vents in the summer will create better air

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flow and use the energy needed to run the air conditioner more effectively. Directing warm air through lower vents in the winter (enabling it to rise) will reduce energy needed to heat the vehicle. Use lighter weight oil in winter, to reduce the energy needed to move thick oil on cold days. Make sure that your tire style and width allows for reduced friction against the pavement. Eliminate unnecessary baggage and weight in your cargo area. Drive your vehicle so as to encourage wheel bearing grease to loosen and remain as liquid as possible on cold days. Reducing friction reduces fuel needed to operate the vehicle.

By adopting more passive ways to drive, you will be less likely to rely on car warmers and block heaters, or other accessories that clutter your life. Saving energy does not have to cost money, and does not require you to buy superfluous gadgets. Saving energy minimally provides satisfaction in knowing that you have done so in a less intrusive, less materialistic manner.

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ECO-FRIENDLY IDEAS

Eco-friendliness and minimalism can embrace each other in many ways. Rather than discuss the myriad opportunities for living in harmony with the environment, I will discuss just a very few of the ideas that others have adopted.

Freecycle.org is an online group with over 8,200,000 members worldwide. It is dedicated to providing links between people who want to dispose of some of their stuff, by finding other people who will be able to use the unwanted goods. Chapters of this group exist in hundreds of cities around the globe. On the other hand, sites like kijiji.com have sections devoted to the exchange of free goods, providing individuals and businesses with the chance to have their goods reused, without going through the conventional recycle process. Probably the most conventional way to be ecologically responsible when getting rid of unwanted goods is to re-use (or use for a different purpose), followed by “freecycling,” and then followed by recycling.

Spend a few moments counting the number of cleaners, solvents and sanitation compounds in your house. Then visit the website, <http://www.ecocycle.org> or <http://www.natural-healthy-home-cleaning-tips.com> for a few ideas on natural cleaning recipes. You’ll be able to eliminate dozens of commercial cleaning products instantly, without buying a host of other

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ingredients.

Collocation is an excellent way to use resources economically. In one business plan that I developed for a rural community, a beef feedlot was collocated along side of a small ethanol facility, which partnered with a biodiesel plant. The ethanol plant produced enriched water and dried distillers grain for the nearby cattle. The spent offgrade oilseed meal from the biodiesel operation was used to produce biogas, along with the spent corn and cattle waste. All of the biogas waste was used to amend soils and produce a rich, organic compost on which sod and trees could be nursed. Water was recovered from the biodiesel operation, to be reused in that biodiesel production as well as in the ethanol facility.

By collocating businesses, these shared resources reduce dependency on standalone, underutilized resources, while closing the loop of consumption.

By working within a loose cooperative, families can share resources. Concepts such as common recreation areas or green space used by residences that back onto the commons make more effective, less costly use of space. Play structures, barbeques, recreation facilities all can be incorporated into the spaces. This process may require legal agreements and documentation, but will result in a considerable saving (both capital cost and ongoing operations or maintenance), as well as a decreased reliance on

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individual ownership of assets.

In Denmark, the Kalundborg Industrial Park takes the cradle to grave concept a step beyond, operating an entirely closed loop system that sees all waste recycled endlessly into new-use products that, once used up, are recycled again into new-use products. The concept, labelled as industrial ecology, starts, for instance, with its coal-burning power plant, which generates electricity and supplies excess steam to run a nearby pharmaceutical factory. Waste heat from the factory is used to heat 3,500 nearby homes. The waste water is recycled back to the coal plant to produce more steam. Fly ash from the spent coal is turned into concrete. Obviously, coal plants are not sustainable operations, but they are ecologically more sustainable than the current standards.

This concept can be applied to your step-wise progress towards clean minimalism. Look for ways to turn what otherwise would be branded as excess into a usable and reusable item. Consider exchanges of goods within Freecycle, or among colleagues and friends, so that what cannot be used in its current form may be utilized by you or otherwise in a “new” life. The old habit of passing on baby clothes, for example, is a basic use of this idea.

The book, *WorldChanging*, describes two modular living unit concepts that epitomize minimal living. The Abito apartment project in the United

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Kingdom takes a basic 347 square foot apartment, adds a modular living unit in its center that incorporates a bathroom behind double doors, a cupboard with washer & dryer hook-ups, a two-person wardrobe & utility console and a kitchen unit with integrated fridge, freezer, stove, oven/microwave, grill & counter. This unit creates four distinct living spaces, utilizing one wall each. Yet, the apartment unit is elegant, with 10.5 foot ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows and stainless steel and enamelled white finishes. Truly, it offers high-class minimalism.

The second system is the “A-Z Living Unit.” A system in a box, it incorporates full mini-kitchen, lounge area, shelving and utility room. Being both modular and portable, it is ideal for short-term apartment rentals and smaller spaces.

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to claim that the goods that we owned were truly sustainable, and made & sold using the highest ethical standards for the treatment of the environment, the labour employed in their construction & distribution and for the consumer's health and safety?

Authors William McDonough and Michael Braungart have reached for this high level of sustainability in developing the protocol of cradle-to-cradle, as described in their book, *Cradle to Cradle*.

Their set of voluntary guidelines prescribe the process of making things that are high-performing, harmless to delicate ecologies and the human

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body, efficient and sustainable. Everything that receives the C2C certification should either be recycled, remade or buried to compost readily.

Such a standard of sustainability is a true example of minimalism, regardless of the product. By owning goods that are 100% C2C-certified, we are making minimal use of our environment, and should not cause feelings of guilt, even when that product is frivolous or self-serving, since its use has no negative impact on our surroundings. Minimalism, as has already been stressed, does not mean doing without. It means making the best possible use of everything we own.

A new revolution is occurring across cities that is reviving an old way of life: urban gardening. The North American city dweller is finding health and joy through tilling up the back yard and planting vegetables, herbs and even edible flowers. This is a return to the European and Asian standards from the early 1900s. Even more of return to the past is the practice of urban barnyards, with the return of raising chickens on the family yard.

This is a practice that has some drawbacks, though, including the potential for spread of disease through the flocks and transmitted to humans.

These two revivals, though, are indicative, in part, of many people's desire to experience a more simplistic, wholesome and basic way of living.

Over the past two dozen years, I have experimented with a variety of "poor man's"

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versions of sophisticated alternative energy systems, even precluding the popular rising of energy conservation ideas.

In 1981, I constructed a simple geothermal system in my back yard in the city. I began by excavating, manually, a 20 foot by 20 foot area, 3 ½ feet in depth, in my back yard. Then, I laid down 250 feet of 1" pvc tubing, covering those loops with the excavated soil. The ends of the hose were connected to a car radiator that I had purchased from an auto wrecker. I then filled the tubing and radiator with a blend of ¼ antifreeze and ¾ water. About three feet from the radiator, I cut into the tubing and connected a 12-volt boaters water pump, and connected it to a car battery. This enabled the water/glycol mix to circulate. I used a small electric fan to move the air flowing over the radiator vents.

Throughout the summer, this geothermal system provided great cooling, while, right through until early winter, it provided modest heat. The following year, I reconstructed it so that I was able to divert the air flow into the rear porch, instead of the kitchen area. This meant that I could heat the porch sufficiently well into the winter.

In a cabin that I owned, I installed a 3" length of abs plumbing pipe inside the north wall of the house, running from near the ceiling to the floor. The pipe vented outside, with another vent at the other end on the floor. Because my cabin was located on a slope, running from north to south,

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the cool air was drawn in from the top, vented along the floor, and flowed outside. In this manner, I created a natural “fan” to stimulate air movement during the warmer summer.

Two other po’ boy designs involved using waste water for heat and irrigation.

The first system was a waste water heat recovery system. By cutting into the drain line just after the shower and sink, and before entering the main waste pipe, I was located at the bottom edge of the tank, with the outlet at the top. In order to clean the tank periodically, I installed a valve at the bottom, as well. By forcing the waste hot water in through the bottom, I was able to recapture much of the heat from the water, as it flowed through the tank to the upper outlet. The total cost did not exceed \$25, yet recovered an average of \$40 in waste heat each year.

A friend of mine uses a slightly different system. He wrapped flexible copper tubing, filled with water, around the length of his drain, which captures the heat and allows it to disperse passively over an hour or so.

The second system has been used for the past year in our yurt. It is extremely simple to install. I directed all of our waste gray water from the sink, tub and shower into a 230 litre (45 gallon) tank that rests on a 4-wheeled platform dolly. As soon as the tank is full, I wheel it to the garden area and use it on my shrubs and fruit trees. Total cost? Less than \$20 for the recycled drum and p-trap

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entering the tank from the drains.

One of the simplest energy savers is a tankless water heater. Available on eBay for \$130-250, these systems save space, operate at less than 30% of the cost of conventional tank systems, and provide instant endless hot water.

Every day, new eco-friendly ideas and products hit the market. I invite you to visit our blogs at

<http://leanandgreenliving.blogspot.com/>,

<http://eatingwild.blogspot.com/>

or

<http://enviromorevolution.blogspot.com>.

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BAREBONES BUSINESS

It is actually possible to run your business while utilizing the minimalist philosophy. Yes, image is important to a business, but what goes on in the backrooms does not need to be reflected in the front office.

The most obvious place to begin the minimalist's purge of unnecessary items is with office equipment.

Most offices use both laptops and desktop computers, yet laptops work as well, or better than conventional desktop units and provide the added benefit of being sufficiently mobile for any work to be done from home or on the road. Inexpensive laser printers are more efficient than photocopiers for most office environments, and easily replace inkjet units. All-in-ones, today, are good replacements for the fax and photocopier, if somewhat slower. Telephones, too, can be tied into the Internet for far less cost than conventional landlines. By integrating phones into the laptop, cellular phone costs while travelling out-of-area can cut costs while also reducing the redundancy of a cell phone with two plans.

Too often, we invest in expensive office fixtures and equipment needlessly, where leases or short-term rentals would be more appropriate. As well, we tend to buy equipment and fixtures that are underutilized, as well as lease office space that is used less than a couple of hours a day. This is

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most applicable to contractors, salespeople and one-person consultancy businesses. By participating in a shared office program, we are able to cut costs by more than 80% and reduce the need for underused equipment and fixtures.

In a similar vein to sharing offices and equipment, sharing of staff can be an effective way of cutting costs. Consider employing an office person that can answer phones, do word processing and take care of bookkeeping for several related businesses (each with a minimal demand on her time), such as trades people or delivery and cargo hauling businesses.

Simply by organizing your office and your office time, you can condense demand for your time, or your equipment. Consider, for example, planning your sales calls for each day to be made to clients with specific needs and interests, rather than just making random calls. By so doing, you will be able to concentrate your resources to meet that group's specific requirements, rather than attempting to meet a wide range of needs. This places less of a demand on your resources.

Organizing time during the day will allow you to shut down the office for several hours (unless you rely on a storefront operation), and have all receptionist duties performed on a work-at-home basis. This, in turn, allows your staff to work more efficiently.

Simplifying your office operations often enables you to simplify your more pedantic routines, which,

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in turn, enables you to be less reliant on physical assets of a typical business.

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VACATIONS, ENTERTAINMENT & HOLIDAYS

Freedictionary.com defines minimalism as “being or providing a bare minimum of what is necessary.” This is the conventional view of minimalism in art, architecture and life. Yet, it is a view that does not reflect the reality of the minimalist lifestyle. “Giving up everything” is a martyr’s approach that contradicts the essence of minimalism, which is to use less to achieve a specific result. Otherwise, the homeless would be our only true minimalists.

It has often been said that we do not live to work; we work to live. Leisure, entertainment and vacations from work are essential elements of living. Minimalism entails enjoying life responsibly.

When I began the journey of deliberately and methodically “giving up everything,” one of my first steps was to prioritize what was important in my life. Of course, family and community ranked highly. But so did my own leisure and entertainment.

For years, I had foregone any sort of vacation, devoting my free time outside of my family to my work. Once I recognized that I did myself, my family and even my clients a disservice by excluding “recovery time” from my routine, I began looking at how I could integrate relaxation into my life.

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That required a critical assessment of how I was devoting resources, in what ratio, to the various components of my life. It was easy to do so in some regards.

For example, I could measure, objectively, the value per dollar of any business purchase. All that I had to do was calculate the revenues generated by that asset versus the acquisition and maintenance costs. Return on Investment is a coldly objective measurement.

In my personal life, I could easily ascertain what the ROI on the vehicle that I wanted to buy, compared to another. Since my vehicle was used for business purposes, that comparison was distantly objective, as well. Had I wanted to use that auto for personal use, however, a different, more subjective assessment of ROI would have been needed.

Subjective return on investment must consider comfort & pleasure, pride of ownership, ratio of time spent on personal use versus time spent for business purposes, future aspirations and plans for use, and so on.

So how do you calculate personal benefit in a more clinical, dispassionate manner, when one of the benefits of acquisition of an asset or activity is the pleasure and passion that it evokes?

First, you need to know what the value of each of your options is, both subjectively and objectively. If, for example, you are contemplating the purchase of a \$1,000 big-screen television, how

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many hours of entertainment will it provide? (Note: I am not asking how many hours it will be watched, but how many hours of unique and valued viewing will it provide.) Remember to factor in the repair costs over its life, the cost of electricity, the cost of such peripherals as a DVD player, cable connection and so on. Now, divide the total cost by the number of hours of unique entertainment that it will provide, to get a value per hour.

Let's assign, for discussion purposes, a total cost of \$4,500 over the six-year lifespan of the equipment, and an average entertainment time of 1.25 hours per day, six days per week (2,808 hours). Cost per hour will be \$1.60.

Next, look at your other options; for instance, a two-week winter vacation. What is the total cost? How many hours of pure enjoyment will it provide? Let's assume that the vacation cost you \$700 for the air fare, \$1,500 for the accommodations, for a total of \$2,200. But you will spend 16 hours per day enjoying that vacation, plus residual memories and anticipation (and planning) of the event for another 150 hours. That's a total of 374 hours, or \$5.88 per hour of benefit.

It would seem that the television is the best investment. Add in the fact that more than one person is likely to enjoy the entertainment unit, and the return per hour improves dramatically.

Yet, is that the final decision? Next, you will need to consider the subjective portion of the

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entertainment value. That is, would aimlessly sitting in front of a TV be, per hour, as enjoyable as an escape to a tropical island? If not, how much more value do you place on that exotic vacation?

Here is where you should have begun, but probably have done, a long time ago. Prioritize for yourself which are your favourite entertainment and leisure events, and how disparate are the least favourite from the most?

My wife enjoys her television, but, in no way, is addicted to it. She craves, though, her daily fix of Wheel of fortune.

When we moved to our yurt, we opted to give up cable and satellite TV access, but not our 42" television. Instead, we purchased a basic BlueRay DVD player and Wii station. We also relinquished high-speed Internet access. To obtain my wife's Wheel fix, we download old public-domain episodes from the Internet at the local library, and play them. We use Wii to keep fit during the winter, and occasionally rent movies. Our costs went from \$155 per month to \$3.00, for a total annual saving of \$1,824. Our entertainment value did not decrease by even one penny!

But effective use of our entertainment dollar went further. We have used the extra free former television-viewing time to camp, garden, bike, visit various local fairs and festivals, and so on.

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With the \$1,800 we saved (not including the savings on garden produce), we devoted half to our increased vacation budget.

By determining what was important to us and what was less important, we were able to divert funds to the areas from which we derived the least entertainment to those in which we derived the most.

Minimal entertainment, then, consists of getting the most “bang for your buck,” by subjectively determining what is valuable to you, and objectively analysing the cost versus benefit per hour.

We have also entered the realm of the dreaded timeshare vacationer. “Time share” is a bad word in many circles, predicated on the deservedly negative reputation associated with early versions of timeshares. However, vacation groups such as RCI, Interval Vacations and Starwood Vacation Group have refined the programs so much that the early editions are now nothing more than obsolete Model Ts languishing in overgrown farm fields.

Vacation clubs, as well, have evolved to provide great benefit per dollar invested, for those who place a priority on travel as a form of recreation.

Although time shares and vacation clubs involve deeded ownership, they are less about actual ownership than they are about opportunity to diversify your travel experiences. That makes them closer to rentals than possessions, and are more in keeping with the minimalist philosophy.

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Currently, a group of our friends are working on a strategy to “vacation” in Haiti, while providing funds to a local community for housing materials. Our vacation time will be spent living with and helping those people who will occupy the homes to build the units. In this way, we will not be consuming their resources in a colonial manner, but working under their direction while diverting our holiday dollars into more practical applications. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy involved in launching this effort is proving to be unwieldy.

The concept, though, is consistent with the idea of “voluntourism,” where people devote vacation time to working on a chosen charitable pursuit, often in a locale some distance from their own homes.

It is a unique way to combine charitable efforts and holidays, to benefit oneself and others who may be in need.

SUSTAINABILITY

Having made biodiesel from hemp, flax and canola oils, from rancid & sprouted seeds, from waste vegetable oil and animal fat, I had learned that a high-quality diesel alternative could be fabricated quite easily. Having conducted a research initiative into producing biogas from animal manure, grass clippings & old hay and waste or off-grade oilseed & grains, I had learned that a good propane substitute could be made with a little effort and effective production controls. However, I had not attempted to use various petro-fuels as alternatives to conventional ones. Recently, I began experimenting with various petroleum products in alternative use scenarios. Diesel, for example, can be used as a substitute for kerosene in kerosene heaters or even kerosene and citronella lamps.

While the odour of burning diesel is quite obnoxious, diesel heat in a relatively closed space such as a workshop is less risky than using propane heaters. Propane consumes huge amounts of oxygen, and puts out high levels of carbon monoxide, making its use in closed spaces quite dangerous. Diesel, too, has a relatively high flash point, meaning that it is somewhat safer than kerosene if drops are spilled. On the other hand, diesel produces more impurities, and will clog filters and lines more easily.

Last month, I found an ethanol-burning fireplace

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that claimed to consume 1/3 litre per hour. Since, in Canada, we cannot buy pure ethanol directly, this great “deal” would be valueless, if not for the fact that methanol can be substituted for ethanol. Indeed, when making biodiesel, you may use either ethanol or methanol in the chemical mix. Methyl hydrate, by the way, is another name for methanol, and can be found in any paint store. At \$3.00 or more per litre, though, the price is not attractive. Another option is to buy methanol in bulk (less than 235 litres, as the Dangerous Goods Act restricts transport and storage of larger quantities. Bulk methanol may be obtained at some race tracks and some larger fuel distributors.

The advantage of methanol is that it is not very hygroscopic. That is, it does not attract moisture to the same degree as ethanol. Besides, who wants to waste good whisky by distilling it down to pure ethanol?

Biogas and methane can be used with relatively little risk to the engine in any diesel engine. However, biogas has high sulphate content, and tends to corrode iron products rapidly. Even manure is not a pure waste product! Well-dried manure will burn, albeit with an unpleasant odour and lots of deposits excreted. Still, it burns a little like compressed & dried peat, so it offers an emergency option for a wood heater. A word of caution is needed, though. Use of alternative fuels must be a “stopgap” measure

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only, and must be done with regard to proper safety precautions.

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LIVING & LEARNING

Minimalism can be integrated into, or designed as a framework for most elements of our lives.

From charity to education, from communal & community living to increased independence & innovative networking, minimalism simplifies, while enriching our day-to-day lives.

Part of the problem with living in today's affluence-oriented world is that we measure ourselves in comparison to others, instead of by our own internal standards and objectives. By focusing on making proper choices as to what fits in our environment, we should be focusing on how we fit into the environment that we would like to see.

In his book, *Voluntary Simplicity* (Harper Paperbacks, 1998), author Duane Elgin discusses the idea of choice fatigue. It is a counterintuitive approach, since many of us work on the mistaken belief that choice is always good.

But today's marketplace inundates us with choice. Consider toothpaste. Wikipedia lists 26 brands of toothpaste in North America alone. That does not include the various types, or the various specific toothpaste variants. Crest, for example, offers at least ten variants on its main brand. One source places the number of types at 1,407. Now multiply that number by the selection of flavours. All of that for the basic formula of a binder, cleaner and protection factor. That simply is far too many choices for any of us to consider.

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How about larger purchases, such as automobiles? We have SUVs, 4-wheel drive, 2-wheel drive, all-wheel drive (how is that different from 4-wheel?), crossovers, sport, performance, pickup trucks, sedans, coupes, two-,three-, four- or five-door models, commuters, subcompacts, compacts, mid-sized, luxury and stretch vehicles. We have hybrids, electrics, gasoline and diesel. We have Toyota, Saab, GM, Ford, Chrysler, Honda, Hyundai, Volvo, Mercedes, Fiat, Mazda, Nissan, BMW, Jaguar, etc.. We have Prius, Corolla, Camry, Fusion, Focus, and the other several hundred models.

Don't even consider the myriad choice in clothes, or furniture or food, or jewellery or education or hotels or

Small wonder that choice fatigue exists, and has become so prevalent. It is, in large measure, the precipitating factor in the rise in popularity of the minimalist approach to living. Simply by eschewing the need to choose from often-frivolous options, we relieve the stress associated with that choice. But relinquishing choice, contrary to what may seem, is not for the faint of heart. We have become imprinted with the model of consumerism as a reflection of our success, instead of the model of proper, responsible living being the guide for our success.

Sustainability, as described in the prior chapter, is not merely about physical environmental sustainability. It is as much about sustainability

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from a lifestyle perspective, enabling us to avoid the trap of acquisition in order to live comfortably.

At the very beginning of this book, I talked about how my wife likes to wring that last drop of milk from the carton. When I first met her, I found that she had other quirks, as well. For instance, whenever I would visit the kitchen sink, I noticed that she had placed little plastic bags over the tops of the soap bottle, over the scrub brush holder, over the tap handles.

Having enjoyed the idiosyncrasies of some rather unusual people in my past, I attributed this practice to being one of those little odd habits of cleanliness that some people adopt. It took me a couple of weeks to realize that she was washing and drying baggies, to be reused for food storage! She was wringing the last drop of use out of them, as well. That is environmental and lifestyle sustainability.

My own habits may have seemed equally odd to her. On one occasion, I had acquired a dozen used and well-worn fabric tarpaulins from a grocery warehouse that was tossing them in the trash. At the same time, I had acquired numerous broken boxes. I laid each of these on the ground in my yard, shovelled gravel over them and then leaf mould compost and finally, dirt. I like “lasagne gardening,” which involves layering of growing medium over an impervious but porous material. The fabric and cardboard eventually decays, but keeps the weeds out of this new garden for

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several years. It cuts down on tilling and recycles waste in a sustainable manner. Janice thought that this technique was peculiar, indeed.

The lesson is simple. There are limitless ways to use and reuse. There are countless chances for us to put goods designed for one purpose to another purpose, once the original intended use has been exhausted. That is part of the cradle-to-cradle concept discussed earlier.

Focus on how to re-use, re-design or re-orient a product or system to be more efficient & practical, to serve more than one purpose, or to extend its life.

Feng shui seeks to use aesthetics to more comfortably align our lives in such a manner as to obtain qi. It is not incongruent with minimalism. Minimalism seeks to de-clutter our environment (internal and external), so that we can focus on and enjoy more fully the relevant items in our life. Once you have de-cluttered and re-oriented your lifestyle through minimalistic principles, feng shui strategies can be employed to maximize your enjoyment of those new surroundings.

I have heard minimalism described as being an attempt to focus one's life on one's own needs, to the exclusion of others. In part, there is some truth here. In order to prioritize your life, you must learn what is important and relevant to you. However, minimalism is also a way to fit better into the world and community around you.

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One of the most effective ways to minimize is to share resources. A logical extension is to share purchases, as well. Although cooperative buying is a viable option, there are much simpler choices available.

Retailers such as Sam's Club or Costco offer bulk buying that lends itself well to buying in a group of family members or friends, and sharing the savings. Even cooperative or bulk buying with strangers is a viable option. Farm cooperatives, where groups of families or individuals commit to purchasing a portion of a market garden's annual output, is a healthy and sustainable alternative to individual vegetable, egg, dairy or meat purchases.

If you are able, consider putting together your own coop group and approaching a local grower with a proposal to set aside a segment of his fields for your group. Use the Internet to set up a series of buying groups whenever you need to purchase specific items other than food, and bulk buying will be of benefit. In some cases, you will be able to access goods that might otherwise not be available in your region, such as fresh seafood, specific appliances or materials, or unique vacation & entertainment options, such as a travel club or vacation ownership concept.

Being minimal does not mean that you have to be indolent. Take the initiative to set up community gardens, or other community resources.

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Across the country, many urban malls, shopping venues, warehouses and big-box stores stand vacant. Consider working with a local group to set up gathering points and community buildings in these neglected properties, or, even better, start a housing project that turns wasted buildings into affordable housing.

Minimalist philosophy factors easily into charity and philanthropy. Consider how to stretch your giving dollar by placing it more wisely, where each dollar leverages \$2, \$3 or \$4 more. Aim your gifts and your efforts at those with the least means, so that the small amounts make a greater impact. WorldChanging (page 357) describes how to set up giving circles that allow us to work within our closed network of friends and family to target giving more effectively.

The Centre for Effective Philanthropy (<http://www.effectivephilanthropy.com>) shows how to set up and manage these circles, such as One By One. Giving, even minimally, can be made to be more effective with proper planning.

If you have a specific skill or expertise, consider sharing that resource. Open Source information has expanded the potential for learning tremendously, and opened doors for innovation that otherwise would have been limited to those that had the financial resources to do so.

Sharing resources between individuals, between organization and between schools allows for a more economical foray into learning and

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exploration. Post your knowledge online, so that others may work with it and find ways to expand or improve on that base. Holistic learning is more than using all resources available. It is using all resources effectively and efficiently. That can only be achieved by relinquishing proprietary knowledge, so that others can contribute to that base.

Simple solutions are often found to seemingly complex technologies. An innovative networking solution has become popular in the North American underground of Internet users. By developing a string of homemade antennae, groups of local “pirates” have been able to tap into Wi-Fi hotspots and transmit the signal beyond its usual 100-300 foot range to distances that exceed 20 or more kilometres. They use nothing more than trash and materials such as empty Pringles chip cans and wire.

But that access to Internet has also led to use of this learning tool by people who could otherwise not afford access. They are demonstrating a true minimalism, through necessity.

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THE LAST DROP

From food to furniture, housing to transportation, business to leisure, education to communication, there are myriad ways to use less, but to do so more effectively. In some aspects, this is a selfish pursuit, since our capitalistic economy depends on spending, acquiring, disposing of and acquiring again. To deny your flow of money into that cycle diminishes its strength. However, being minimal does not decrease the amount of wealth in circulation, and, in fact, allows it to be redirected more efficiently.

There are those that view some of the strategies that I have advocated as being somewhat socialistic. That is nonsense. What minimalism provides is an avenue for consumerism to become more directed, and allows for a more efficient use of resources. There is nothing more capitalistic than to benefit from greater efficiencies.

However, your choice should not be driven by a dogmatic attitude. Instead, it should be reflective of a choice to live a better life, as you perceive it.

I have chosen to live minimally, as has my wife. We each have a different “take” on what that constitutes. So should you.

You may prefer to live in such a manner that you deny yourself pleasures and leisure. I do not. That does not make me right and you wrong, or vice versa. I advocate that both of us, though, approach our chosen way of living with the idea

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that we want to wring every last drop of living out of life.

I hope that this book has provided you with some assistance and guidance in your journey toward minimalism. I also hope that you take the greatest pleasure in your voyage, and embrace the central idea that I have offered; namely, making the most out of the least.

Can I offer you anything less?