JAY VANSLYKE



minify

A 21st century guide
to living a happier life
with less.

T.J. VanSlyke
@teejayvanslyke
http://tjvanslyke.com
340 S Lemon Ave #6077
Walnut, CA 91789

Copyright © 2012 by T.J. VanSlyke.
All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

7501b661c2da853d23dd4e46dfaefc7eabd9917a

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We've learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life, not life to years.

– George Carlin

Introduction

The Ownership Paradox

A Few Wonderful Things

The Escalator Principle

Tiny House, Tiny Responsibility

Your Practical Wardrobe

The Simple Kitchen

Drop the Bottle

Be Liquid

Telework for Fun and Profit

Avoid info-glut

Conclusion

References

INTRODUCTION

We arrived in San Jose after spending the weekend camping on the coast at Big Sur. Eager for our caffiene sheen, we made our way to the local Peet's to pick up a cup and read for a bit.

He parked his Porsche 911 outside the cafe. 35 years old to our 26 years young, signs of premature aging crept through the pores of his worn out, sold out face. His shirt and slacks cost more than my entire wardrobe, and that wasn't accounting for the designer belt he so smugly donned, securing his pants in a fashion consistent with his apparent stress level.

Mr. Jones was a member of a powerful venture capital firm who backed the likes of medium and large web enterprises you may or may not have heard of. His take-home annual income last year was $459,000, a personal record.

A typical week in the life of Jones consists of six 12-hour workdays extending through the workweek into Saturday, with Sunday reserved for taking conference calls while he makes feeble attempts at playing dolls with his three year old daughter, Clarissa.

Next year, Jones will be diagnosed with colon cancer. By the time he passes, he will have logged over 30,000 hours of work. What an accomplishment. He only spent a hundred or so quality hours with his daughter, but I'm sure she'll forgive him when she sees her inheritance. Right?

I'm not about to try to keep up with the Joneses. In fact, I think we ought to leave them far, far behind.

Usually, rags-to-riches stories end *happily ever after*. This isn't a story about rags, or riches, but the continuum connecting them. It's a story about making (and spending) $100,000 a year when

$40,000 used to keep you happy and leave you time for your now-neglected passions. And it's a story about following your instincts and passions instead of so-called common sense.

When I was a teenager living in my parents' house, I'd fantasize about buying a van and rigging it up with an in-dash computer, a bumpin' stereo, and all the lifestyle necessities of a teenage geek. And, in my rebellious youth, living in a van seemed like a reasonable way to escape the confines of my parents' house. But my adolescence passed, and with it, my tenacity for precariousness. I graduated high school and enrolled in college.

My collegiate years cultivated a sense of self-sufficiency and empowerment I hadn't known before. I was the all-too-familiar poor college student. I'd learned to live on the meager paychecks my part-time retail job provided me. I pondered the untouched beauty of the countryside. I blossomed from a teenage recluse into a curious young adult. And I did it all in thrift store clothes, with a broken cell phone and a Moleskine journal.

I have fond memories of solving all the world's problems over cans of piss-beer and ensuring each other that, when we graduated, we'd make a difference. We'd live more capable, efficient, and elegant lives than our parents and ancestors had. We'd be the change we wanted to see in the world.

By my senior year, I was ready to apply what I had learned, and to enact the principles we'd erected. But, for better or worse, and counter to the typical millennial college graduate's experience, I was being recruited left and right by software consultancies starving for fresh talent in what was and still is a vibrant talent war. And let me tell you, the promise of a salary comparable to your parents' income is a tricky thing to turn down when you're

21.

When you're young and have money, you don't stop to consider the ill consequences of frivolous spending. The volatility of an early-twenty-something's emotions, aspirations, fears, and insecurities are ideal fodder for the budding advertiser. I bought clothes as substitute for confidence and electronics instead of shared experience. My brand of urban fashion-aware geek-chic hipsterism was a marketer's wet dream.

Then, one day, I realized what had happened. I'd become everything my college self said I wouldn't. I'd alienated myself in a giant apartment, a fortress of expensive toys to distract me from the sad truth: I was fundamentally unhappy. Despite my high salary, I only managed to save a measily few thousand dollars. I had spent it all.

Earlier this year, I sold most of my belongings and moved into a tiny motorhome parked outside my girlfriend's house. This exercise has forever changed my impression of what is important in my life, and has opened doors to new experiences my previous, bloated self hadn't considered possible.

This book is about my journey from more to less, from chaos to elegance, from entanglement to simplicity. Along the way, I'll give you reassurance that, though my lifestyle may seem extreme, you can adapt heartily to the changes I prescribe.

The transformation was as much a mental challenge as a physical one. Reducing one's belongings by an order of magnitude takes a degree of discipline and resourcefulness which can only be learned by experience. If you become overwhelmed during your transformation, know I was, too. If you're tempted to give up and go back to your familiar comforts, conceivably you will have

learned something in the process. But hopefully, your newfound freedoms will make forever clear that something is inherently broken with "business as usual" in the modern American household.

In these pages, I'd like to convince you that the most important thing you own is that grey matter lodged between your ears. Along the way, I'll share some of what I've learned throughout the course of my downsizing, as well as useful tips when pursuing your own.

In sharing any self-improvement endeavor, it's difficult not to give the impression of being smug or conceited. My intention is not self-satisfaction nor gratification, but is to offer you a glimpse into my alternative lifestyle. My hope is that you will use my accounts to build and enrich your own life. I cannot help whether you believe I wrote these pages in smug self-servitude.

And a note on the word *minimalism*: I do not, and will not, identify myself as a minimalist. Strict adherence to doctrine never did anyone any good, so I invite you to modify my ideas as they fit into your life, whether that means selling one of your three cars or selling everything that won't fit in your backpack. My goal in the coming pages is not to convince you to own as little as possible, but to own things which are valuable to enhancing your life's experience.

THE OWNERSHIP PARADOX

Buy a nice car and the biggest house you can afford. Dinnerware for eight. Walk-in closets. Heated bathroom floors. Storage facilities. Weekend convertible.

Why is it normal to own so much stuff? Take an inventory of all the things you own. Is it fewer than 100? 1,000? How many of those things do you use on a daily basis? Further still, how many of those things, if rendered useless tomorrow, could you do without?

Take your car to the shop. Call the plumber to fix your broken toilet, but use the second or third bathroom in the meantime. The lease is up on my loft, do you know anyone with a truck to help me move? I totalled the BMW and my insurance is only covering half of the damage.

Tyler Durden wasn't bluffing when he said the stuff we own ends up owning us. Our modern lifestyles have afforded us valuable conveniences, but it's up to us to curate which of them we keep beside us.

The typical American kitchen contains between four and eight table settings (two forks, two spoons, a butter knife, a steak knife, a small plate, a large plate, a cup, and a bowl), two saucepans, two skillet pans, between two and eight pieces of chef cutlery, mixing bowls, measuring cups, … you get the picture. In my loft apartment kitchen, stocked with all of those things, I found there were a few items I used every day. The rest collected dust in my cupboards, used on the few occasions when I baked cookies or made a casserole.

Most living rooms contain what has become a standard for American homes: a sofa, a recliner, a coffee table, two end tables,

and an entertainment console. I recently had all of these things, too. When furnishing our homes, we often follow by example without considering our own needs. But we often neglect to consider the ill consequences of a fully-furnished living room. We find ourselves huddled around the television late into the night, waking in the early morning dreary-eyed with the blue glow of a DVD menu screen etched into our retinas. We're trading comfort for experience and entertainment for enrichment.

While it does have its merits, material ownership is double-edged. Ownership indeed provides conveniences you'll enjoy for the lifetime of the thing you own. But when you start to amass personal belongings "just in case" or "for when I might need it", you'll find those things that started out as modern conveniences turn quickly into stressful liabilities.

I move. Frequently. I enjoy exploring new places, whether another neighborhood or another country. The things standing in my way when I move are, well, my things. I rent a moving truck. In the fury and frustration of the process, some things end up in a free pile, or worse, the trash. Moving is an expensive process with a lot of stuff. After reducing my belongings to what fits in my small RV, moving is as simple as driving to my destination. And even if my house weren't as mobile as it is, I only have 100 square feet worth of stuff. I could move into a new apartment in an hour.

There's a spiritual component to owning less as well. Living with fewer things means a mind less cluttered with concern about those things, free to enact positive experiences. Shifting away from a material-driven lifestyle toward an experience-driven one offers a new sense of tranquility. When you realize you never took the time to critique "normal", you recognize that normal is downright excessive.

Whether you're aware of it or not, the clutter around you is causing you great stress. Account for every object in your vision right now, up to and including those in your periphery. Can you count them on one hand? What makes you think your brain, constantly being bombarded with noisy sense data, is able to account for all of it *every single day*?

At the maximal end of this spectrum is the compulsive hoarder, a condition experts believe is a mental illness of its own accord. There isn't a clear line between the hoarders and hoard-nots, but an observer might draw the line where the subject compromises their own health in their inability to discard seemingly useless possessions. David F. Tolin, founder and director of the Anxiety Disorders Center at the Institute of Living in Hartford, Connecticut[1], conducted a study of compulsive hoarders using brain scans[2]. Hoarders made decisions about whether to retain or discard various seemingly unnecessary items. Throughout the exercise, Tolin and his team observed increased activity in the orbitofrontal cortex, a prefrontal cortex region of the brain involved in decision making processes. It turns out that decisions made to discard our belongings are often significantly more stress-inducing than the decisions to acquire them.

I believe there is an ownership "sweet spot": A number of items at which your belongings work for you and not the other way around. My intention is not for you to sell all but what fits in a backpack and buy a one-way ticket to Thailand (not that that's necessarily a bad idea). But to keep things for the sake of having paid money for them at one time is foolish and disempowering. Accepting and embracing this mental shift is what I seek to instill in my readers.

Appropriately, if we are to speak effectively about our belongings, I think it's crucial to examine the nomenclature commonly used when categorizing their value.

An *asset* is an item of value owned. Your house and car are stores of value and, should you sell them, you'd receive monetary compensation.

A *liability* is "a thing for which someone is responsible." Wait a minute. If a liability is a thing for which you're responsible, doesn't that make your house and car *as much a liability as an asset*? If you own your house and car outright, you're not responsible for making loan or mortgage payments, but you're surely responsible for their maintenance and upkeep.

Is your house truly an *asset* in the sense that it represents a store of untapped value? Not really. While it's true that a house may appreciate in dollar value through the course of owning it, you'll still need to *sell the house* in order to reallocate its value elsewhere. Not only does this mean that the true liquid value of the house cannot be realized immediately, but it also means that a large amount of your time or money will be invested in selling the house .Your property is only worth its utility and function in your life as it is *right now*.

Walk down any street in America and you'll find five-bedroom houses with generous common spaces and ornate, fenced yards. Walk a few blocks further and you'll find a public park. Every weekend, millions of Americans volunarily put on their landscape worker hats and tend to their oversized yards. Isn't it easier and more resourceful to share a public yard with your neighbors and let the parks department mow your lawn? We're trained to think of a big yard as an asset. When it's time to maintain it, it's just

another thing tying us down.

Despite all of this anti-homeownership hullabaloo, I am, in fact, a homeowner. But unlike the five bedroom house with the big yard, my home's maintenance is minimized due to its small size and simplicity. My plumbing is simple enough that I can fix it myself. My car is my house and my house is my car, so an upgrade to one means an upgrade to both. It's as much house as I need, and no more. That means I'm afforded more freedom to, well, live life.

The next time you're tempted to make a purchase, ask yourself whether the utility of the item will exceed the liability sustained by owning it. Whether that liability be in its maintenance, storage, use, or disposal, you'll find that most things you'd normally purchase without blinking an eye suffer greater liability than the utility provided.

A FEW WONDERFUL THINGS

I own a Dyson handheld vacuum cleaner[3] which retails for over $200. It's the most durable, powerful handheld vacuum I've ever used, and it has a 5 year warranty. Every other vacuum I've ever owned has failed me. Purchasing the Dyson was a product of careful research, rather than arriving at the department store intending to leave with a vacuum.

My coffee grinder is handcrafted out of hardwood and was made right here in Oregon. It fits onto a Mason jar, which means I'm easily able to replace its container should it break.

My phone is your calculator, your scanner, your camera, your calendar, and your to-do list. My laptop computer is your television. My tablet computer is all the records and books on your shelf. All the things that used to take up an entire room in the house now fit on a modestly-sized table.

Equally as consequential as how many things you own is *which things you own*. Less space for frivolity means more capital for long-lasting, wonderful things. It's much easier to amass a collection of unremarkable things when you have space for them. When you own well-designed "Swiss Army Things" which serve several functions despite their humble size, you reduce clutter without sacrificing value.

There are a number of techniques you can use to aid in pruning your belongings. In my case, my limited living space dictates the amount of stuff I can own comfortably. You might be minifying in a larger living space, which will require a bit more self-control. Dave Bruno's *100 Thing Challenge*[4] advocates breaking free from the habits of American consumerism by eliminating all but 100 of

your possessions. I disagree with this approach because it encourages reducing your possessions to an arbitrary benchmark instead of considering each item's role in your optimal lifestyle.

I take a more pragmatic approach: If I use an item at least once per week, it stays. Otherwise, I sell or donate it. I do my best to maintain my belongings accordingly. Think of your home as a storefront, and the items in it as your products for sale. Would you keep merchandise on the shelves no one wants to buy?

Take an inventory of all the things you own. Do you notice any unnecessary redundancy? Two computers? A television and a computer? A spare set of sheets? Go through each set of redundant items and put one aside. Say to yourself "The liability I leave behind by discarding this item is greater than the utility afforded by keeping it." You'll come to the discovery that many of the things you own aren't necessary, and some are actually causing you grief (ever try maintaining three computers?).

If you've got any unnecessary valuable items, you'll be able to amass a small (or large) savings by selling them on Craigslist or eBay. When I was downsizing, I gave myself a time limit of three months. If an item wasn't selling, I'd reduce the price until it did. If it still wasn't selling, I gave it away.

There will be those priceless items whose sentimental value makes it difficult to part. My compromise in this circumstance is to take a photograph of the item and archive it in my digital photo collection. That way, I never forget the thing and its meaning, but I'm not encumbered by it any longer. It's difficult to part with the things that remind us of loved ones or experiences come and gone, but in letting go of the past we inspire progress in the present.

As you sell your unneeded things, you'll probably amass a hefty

stack of dollar bills. *Do not spend this money*. Go to the bank and open a new savings account, and deposit every penny. Not only will this discourage spending your new liquidity on more clutter, but it will give you a running counter of just how much new lifestyle potential your minification exercise has afforded you.

The end product of my minification process was $10,000. A large portion of that I used to pay off my RV, but the rest is now mine to leverage as I please. And that feeling is just so much more fulfilling than a room full of toys.

THE ESCALATOR PRINCIPLE

Do you know how stairs work? Could you build a functional scale model of a stairway? You could probably build one out of popsicle sticks (with a weight restriction clearly marked for safety, of course).

Do you know how an escalator works? Do you think you could build a functional scale model of an escalator? Unless you're a mechanical engineer, the short answer is probably "no".

Your house is filled with escalators that could be stairs. We fill our houses with electric kettles, microwave ovens, water softeners, robotic vacuum cleaners, heated swimming pools, and dishwashers. How many of these things do you feel empowered to maintain yourself? The truth is, almost nobody can maintain every appliance in the modern home. We call upon repairmen to fix things that can be fixed, and we call upon the dump truck for the rest.

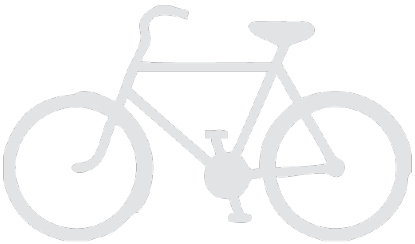
The *escalator principle*, as I've coined it, is the notion that a great many things we own utilize complex systems we do not understand ourselves, despite there being simpler "old-world" alternatives which do the job as well or better, with fewer moving parts. In the way Occam's razor dictates that the simplest explanation tend to be correct, the escalator principle dictates that the simplest solution tends to be the most effective.

I love to drink coffee. You might call me out as hypocritical considering the frivolty of slurping down cups of coffee, but it's the one monkey on my back I can't seem to shake off. Anyway, a few years back, I bought a small electric burr coffee grinder. It wasn't anything fancy. It had a grind setting and a power button.

The power button was finicky: I'd have to wiggle the unit back and forth and press it a dozen times before it would start grinding sometimes. Eventually, the coffee grinder just stopped powering up altogether. Rendered helpless by its designed-obsolesence construction and proprietary screwheads, I threw the thing in the trash and bought a manual crank grinder. Now my coffee grinder always turns on, because I'm the power supply. What's more, I've reduced the systemic complexity involved in grinding coffee to the point where I am better prepared to fix the appliance myself should it fail.

Now, I need make a disclaimer. I'm not saying we should dump all our modern conveniences and live out the rest of our lives as primitive neo-Luddites. The past century has seen innovations which have drastically improved our quality of life, and I seek not to convince you they should be ignored or discarded. Instead, make a list of the modern conveniences which you cannot maintain yourself, or which cause you some degree of inconvenience as a result of your owning them, and ask if there is a simpler, more effective way to acheive the same utility.

YOUR CAR IS AN ESCALATOR.
TAKE THE STAIRS



No modern appliance fits this description more aptly than the automobile. I'm not sure there's ever been a device whose task is so simple (transport passengers and limited cargo short to medium distances) but whose maintenance schedule, systemic complexity, and environmental detriment so horrific, that its ownership be a job in and of itself.

In 2009, I purchased the first car I'd ever owned with my own earned cash. My previous rides were generous hand-me-downs from my parents, so I never felt the punch in the gut that comes with handing a greasy used car salesman a check for $6,000. And as you know, $6,000, even for a used car, is a fairly modest price. Two years later, I sold the car since it wouldn't pass the state's emissions inspections and I would have had to have its catalytic converter replaced, costing on the order of a thousand dollars. Knowing full well the car wasn't worth the trouble, I waved goodbye, taking a $3,500 loss. That's $5 per day I paid to own what a bicycle could have acheived for next to nothing. And that doesn't even consider fuel, repairs, and maintenance.

You might rely on your automobile for commuting and errands because you live in a place where public transit and bicycle infrastructure are underdeveloped and/or unsafe. If you're not fortunate enough to live in a well-developed urban area with the facilities for safe active transit, consider relocating to one. You'll find that, along with saving money, you'll be healthier and happier on your commute. And if you commute by bicycle, learning to maintain your mode of transportation is one Google search and socket wrench away.

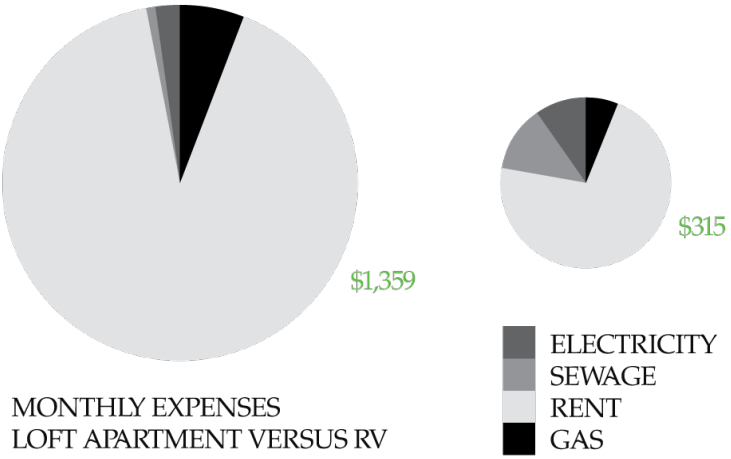
TINY HOUSE, TINY RESPONSIBILITY

To be honest, selling most of my belongings was ancillary to moving into an RV. Initially, I wasn't keen on the idea that I'd have to leave behind so many of my things. But as soon as I took my first breath of clarity, I was hooked.

Can you tell me the location of every item in your house such that I could find it by your verbal description alone? How long does it take you, on average, to clean your house to the point where you'd feel comfortable showing a potential homebuyer? How much do you pay in property tax per year? Homeowner's insurance? What's your annual heating cost? Owning an average American house is downright expensive. In fact, the word 'mortgage' originated out of the Old French phrase *mort gage*, literally translating to "dead pledge." That's right: It's likely you won't see the day when you own your house outright because you died. Home ownership? Poor choice of words if you ask me.

My RV, with all of its modifications, cost me approximately $16,000. I pay approximately $20/mo for propane and $225/mo for my parking spot. Because my home is less than 100 square feet, I can extensively clean my floors, kitchen counter, carpets, and bathroom in about 15 minutes. All of my belongings are organized into bins in my overhead compartments, and I can tell you precisely where any given item is. My house is never a mess, because if it were, I wouldn't make it through the entryway without stepping on something. I'm never tempted to go furniture shopping because my house is full with the table and small dresser I've installed. My wardrobe is limited by the clothes that will fit in my modestly sized closet, so I have to be picky if I buy new clothes since I'll likely displace other clothing out of my closet

and to the local Goodwill.



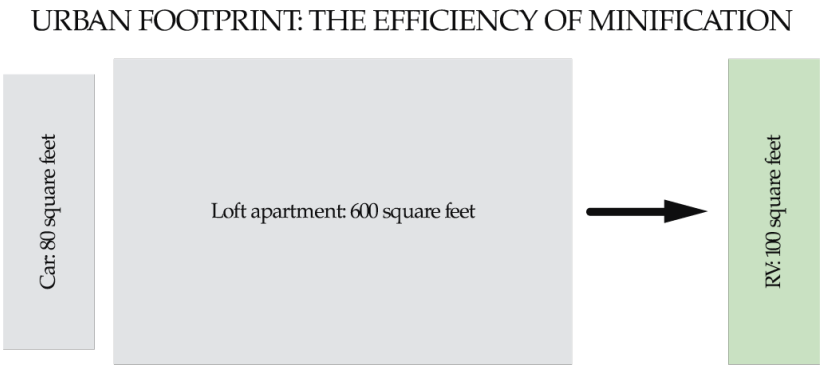
You may feel anxious at the thought of living in such a limited amount of space. I certainly was. I'll never forget the day I picked up my RV. I was terrified. *Even my dorm room in college was bigger than this*, I thought. But, as I moved my belongings in and did some necessary remodeling to conserve space, I adapted. And you will, too. We're very resilient creatures, and you'll be surprised how quickly you leave your old lifestyle behind when you realize the freedom such an arrangement affords you.

There are a few routes to take when converting to a tiny dwelling. The most obvious, but most expensive and skill-intensive, is to build yourself a tiny house. There's a ton of literature on this topic all over the Internet, so I won't go into too much detail. Subscribe to *Tiny House Blog*[5] for a great introduction to tiny house culture.

A less risky option is to rent a small studio apartment. Because of

zoning regulations which do not permit dwellings smaller than 400 or so square feet, you'll be hard-pressed to find an apartment in the 100 square foot range (unless it's something called an Accessory Dwelling Unit, sometimes called a mother-in-law house). But, even at 400 square feet, you'll have a space which will likely force you to downsize from your current arrangement and whose monthly costs will be less.

My favorite option is to do what I did and buy a small RV. As with tiny houses, this is a topic well-covered by other resources on the Internet. Read Tynan's book, *The Tiniest Mansion*[6], for a one-stop resource for converting a small RV into a veritable palace on wheels.



If you do choose to go the RV route, there are a few considerations to make before making the commitment. Parking an RV of any size in a populated urban area is a chore. Even though mine is only 20' long, I'm still fearful I'll hit parked cars backing it out of the driveway I'm renting. I wouldn't move it at all, except that about once per week I have to take it to the local RV dump station to dump my sewage and sink water, as well as refill my fresh

water and propane tanks. This is a quick errand, but it can be a bit unnerving to take your whole life on a wild field trip down the interstate.

You'll also need to find a suitable parking spot. Sleeping in a vehicle parked on the street is illegal in most municipalities, and living in a vehicle parked on private property is typically prohibited by zoning ordinances. Personally, I think living in a vehicle parked on the side of the street is irresponsible and a misuse of public space if you have the means to do otherwise, but if you're in a financial bind it can serve as a viable backup plan. However, it's pretty easy to find a household with a spare driveway or side yard looking for some extra cash. An added benefit is, if you arrange with the owners or tenants, you can use their on-site shower and laundry facilities.

I have yet to be hassled by the city for living in my RV, and I'm convinced that my parking in a fenced-in yard and having good rapport with my neighbors means the local code enforcement won't receive any complaints prompting their involvement. But even if they asked me to leave, the worst that could come of it is a vacation. If the city gave me an option to pay my share in lodging or property tax, I'd be more than happy to. Hopefully we'll see a day when this ordinace is overturned in the interest of affordable and practical housing options.

YOUR PRACTICAL WARDROBE

What percentage of the clothes in your closet or dresser do you actually wear? And what percentage of those do you reach for frequently? In my early twenties, I'd find clothes that had fallen to the bottom of my closet I hadn't worn in months. But for some reason, I kept buying new clothes without thinking to take inventory of my current wardrobe.

I had a running joke with myself that I didn't actually own any matching socks. It seemed like every sock I pulled out of my drawer didn't have a twin. Sometimes I'd just leave the house mismatched.

In a tiny living arrangement, there isn't room for clothing to accumulate. My closet has two jackets, a blazer, four t-shirts, three pairs of pants and a pair of shorts. I own four pairs of underwear and four pairs of socks. My drawers are packed to the top, so if I need new socks, I take the old ones to Goodwill. Unfortunately, most closets are packed to their walls with mediocre, unworn clothes. When you realize you only have room for a few outfits, the tendency is toward well-made, stylish, and simple outfits which can be mixed and matched.

Granted, I have to do laundry at least once per week, but I only ever have to do one load. I keep my wardrobe to darker colors so there aren't any whites to separate. The items in my wardrobe are also easy to wash. Two pairs of denim jeans and four t-shirts comprise my dailywear. This also makes replacing worn clothes a ten-minute errand to the department store.



MINIMALIST CHIC.

If I need to embody professionalism through my wardrobe, I just put a blazer over my t-shirt. A collar, if only on your outerwear, can go a long way in convincing others of higher social status and prowess.

It's a misconception in our culture that designer clothes project sophistication. Every truly sophisticated circle of which I've ever been a part believes designer clothes to be symptomatic of insecurity. When you spend lots of money on expensive clothes with no utility, you're asking to be judged by the hollow exoskeleton in which you've encased yourself.

That isn't to say we should sell our stylish wardrobe and wear clothes we bought at the army surplus store. But it's important to remember the utility of clothing before entering a department store whose floorplan is designed to make you ashamed of what you're currently wearing[7].

THE SIMPLE KITCHEN

When I first moved into the RV, my mother asked, concerned, how I would make toast without a toaster oven. Let's examine this for a moment. Toast is bread, crisped evenly on both sides. Bread is refined flour, yeast, a touch of salt, and some other ingredients, kneaded into dough and baked. Sounds delicious, yes. But is it necessary? Or even healthy? Is it worth owning, maintaining, and storing a toaster when I could just as easily eat a bowl of unrefined steel-cut oats cooked on my stovetop? Nope.

Modern kitchens are generally outfitted with a toaster, blender, food processor, electric mixer, dishwasher, full-sized refridgerator, four-burner stovetop, and an oven. Almost all of these things are escalators. Unless cooking is your passion, most of these things will collect dust and fall into disrepair on your shelves.

Food preparation hasn't always been such a complex endeavor. Our kitchens used to have a sink, a stovetop, and maybe an oven. We used unprocessed grains like rice and barley.

Then something happened. Food increasingly came in jars, boxes, and cans. We were promised a meal in sixty seconds cook time if we sent microwave radiation through our food. And at the other end of the spectrum, cooking a meal from raw, unprocessed ingredients was suddenly a time- and money-intensive affair, reserved for the likes of Rachel Ray and Emeril Lagasse. If you were to cook a full meal, you'd need all the accoutrements of a chef's kitchen.

Nonsense. Preparing a healthy meal requires only a few select things:

- Fresh, unprocessed, raw foods

- A sharp knife
- A bowl
- A saucepan
- A skillet
- One set of utensils

My favorite dish to prepare is what I call "raw slaw." Go to your local grocery store and buy a selection of vegetables, fruits, seeds, and nuts. My favorite combination is kale, green onion, blueberries, and sunflower seeds. Using your sharp knife, cut the leafy ingredients (you are eating dark leafy greens, right?) into specks the size of your fingertip. Dice up the other vegetables and add your nuts, seeds, and fruit.

To make a dressing, mix equal parts olive oil and apple cider vinegar. Add a spoonful of nutritional yeast or a couple slices of avacado to thicken. Pour the mixture over your slaw and mix until evenly coated. Preparation time: 5 minutes. Nutritional content: Puts the TV chef to shame.

Two sets of silverware, one plate, one bowl, and one mason jar make up my serving implements. When I do the dishes, it takes me five minutes at most. My dishes are always done because I don't have another set and need them clean for my next meal.

If you host dinner parties regularly, you'll find this setup limiting. But for your day-to-day needs, a simple kitchen is a virtue.

DROP THE BOTTLE

Recently, I quit drinking alcohol entirely. Though the catalyst was an alcohol-infused quarrel with my girlfriend, careful examination of the issue made me realize alcohol wasn't serving any purpose in my life. Alcohol is a part of our culture. It's socially acceptable to have a glass of wine with meals, to enjoy one or many cocktails among friends after work, and to have a couple beers at a concert. I don't see anything wrong with these activities, but since I've quit, I've had each of these experiences sober and enjoyed them more.

I used to drink for fun. I'd spend hours with friends at bars – sometimes entire weekend afternoons into evenings deliberating about how we'd save the world or the things we'd do the next day. Alcohol, unwaiveringly, gives its user a false sense of completeness. Problems of the day are rendered irrelevant after a few drinks. But they don't stay that way, and often get worse the morning after.

Alcohol is also downright expensive. Cocktails cost anywhere between $5 and $15. Drink three and you're looking at a $30 outing. Now when I go out to bars with friends, I drink juice spritzers. Call me old-fashioned, but I'll go home $20 richer. And straight-headed.

Most of my great ideas come to me after socializing with friends. To be able to leverage these ideas in full, capable sobriety means I build products faster and more effectively. And that gives me the biggest buzz of all.

If you enjoy drinking as much as I did, you'll probably find the first few bar outings difficult. If you're used to drinking cocktails, the juice spritzer route is probably the most effective means of

"feeling drunk" without being drunk. Juice contains a fair amount of fruit sugar, which is about as close as you can get to alcohol without going there. You'll get the same sugar buzz you do from alcohol, without the motor and memory impairment.

If you think you're only fun when you drink, you're wrong. Drunk you're an uglier, more ogreish version of yourself, regardless of the empowerment you might feel. Just hang out outside a nightclub at 2:00am on a Saturday sober and you'll see what I mean.

Your friends may think you're crazy for giving up the bottle. They might even criticize your decision or tell you you don't have a life. *Fuck them*. Friends who resent your conscious decisions to live a more meaningful, intentional life are hardly friends at all. In your abstinence from alcohol, you will form new friendships which, rather than in common drunkenness, unite people in common interests.

Give alcohol freedom a try. Even if you only abstain for a week or a month, the positive effects will reveal themselves quickly. And soon enough, you'll forget you ever drank in the first place.

BE LIQUID

When I was 20 years old, my monthly expenses hovered around $1000. By the time I turned 25, I had amassed a monthly obligation of $2500, with no noticable improvement in my well-being. If left unchecked, your monthly expenditures will scale according to your monthly income.

$1000 used to be a lot of money to me. It could take two weeks working full time to make that much. Now it takes me less than a week.

$1000 used to be a lot of money to me. I could live on $1000 comfortably for a a month. Before my transition, it would last me only a couple weeks.

We're constantly bombarded with excuses to spend money. Whether it be a sale rack at a department store, on television, on your Facebook feed, or at your favorite bar, we're being inundated with claims about products that might make our lives better.

The trick is to be more aware of these impulses, and to outsmart them. Apple is the poster child of companies creating demand and then filling it. Before the iPad, the idea that a device class fitting somewhere between a computer and a phone might be a household name was absurd. Now, it's a product as well-known and revered as the iPod. Apple, by way of its shiny packaging and branding as a revolutionary device, actually *created* demand for its own product.

I do own an iPad, but it's because I believe it to be the most versatile and well-designed devices in its class and it replaces an entire bookshelf's worth of my belongings. But I didn't rush out and buy the new iPad when it arrived, nor the new iPhone. By

pausing and reflecting on the cost of these new, *shinier* toys, I saved myself $1000.

We wonder why we're a nation indebted to the rest of the world. Did we stop to look in our closets? Our walk-in closets? Our closets filled with the notion that owning lots of stuff will set us free? The average American household with credit card debt has $15,956[8] in outstanding debt. in outstanding debt. The average APR on consumer credit cards is 12.78%. Let's examine what that means for the average debtholder.

Let's assume we can pay down our $15,956 debt in $500 installments each month (which might be generous, considering the likely spending habits of someone who has accrued so much credit card debt already). At that rate, it would take 40 months, or over three years to pay down the debt, in which time, $3646.08 in interest will have accrued. That's 22% of the principle value of your credit!

If you're currently in debt, list all of your outstanding debts and their respective interest rates. Irrespective of the loan amounts, pay them back in descending order according to interest rate. It's likely your credit card balances will have higher interest rates than your car payment, student loan, or mortgage. It's not as important how much you pay each month, but that you pay each month. Be persistent, and eventually, your debts will disappear.

As soon as you've paid down your debts, you've probably figured out how much you can set aside each month toward debt payments comfortably. Use that figure as a basis for deciding how much to save or invest each month, and start saving.

There are two financial devices which yield effectively "free money" if you use them correctly. The first, a health savings

account, is a savings account whose deposits are not subject to federal income tax at the time of deposit. Funds can be used to pay for qualified medical expenses without tax liability. What this means is that, if you're dilligent about contributing to your HSA each month, your out-of-pocket medical expenses will be untaxed.

The second device for free money is a Roth IRA. Unlike traditional retirement accounts, contributions to a Roth IRA are not subject to federal income tax. The flipside is that early withdrawals before you turn 65 years old have a hefty penalty. I use my Roth IRA as a savings safeguard. I know I won't draw from it for fun money because of the penalty, so I know I'll always have a savings.

TELEWORK FOR FUN AND PROFIT

If you're a mechanic, a chef, or a teacher, you probably commute to work, and there's really no way to avoid it short of a career change. But an expanding part of the workforce have day-to-day responsibilities which can be done just as well at home. Though our employers might require us to work in their office, we could perform just as well, if not better from home. Or the beach.

The average American worker commutes just over 25 minutes to work each day [9]. That's almost an hour per day spent *going to an office doing work you could do from your bed* . Live where you work, and your workday is shortened by an hour. If you currently work in an office, ask yourself which parts of your job can be done from your home computer. Could you manage to work in the office Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and work from home Thursday and Friday? If you have good standing with your supervisor, ask to work from home one or two days per week.

If your supervisor allows it, start taking advantage of your new quiet work environment by continuing to commit quality work on your days spent at home, and be exceptionally responsive and thorough. Within a few months, you might be able to convince your supervisor that three or four days home will see the same productivity gains as your one or two did.

We tend to talk about work in terms of time. "I worked a 12-hour shift today." "I just want to do a couple hours of work before I go to the soccer game." This viewpoint is as destructive as it is inherently incorrect. If we seek to accomplish anything at all, why are we framing work in the time it will take instead of its substance? "I just need to finish this analysis so I can hand it off to my manager." Now you're not bound by time, but by an outcome.

You've given yourself the freedom to stop early if you've delivered. And delivery, after all, is the only necessary outcome of work.

Every time you start a block of work, ask yourself what you seek to accomplish. Say it to yourself in your head. Even if it's as simple as "write 1,000 words of my book," you'll reinforce the fact that, in exchange for your time, you're inching closer toward a desired outcome. You'll be happy because you're crafting by intention, and your clients and customers will be happy because you're delivering their dreams at a faster pace.

Bob makes $100/hour and works 15 hours per week, giving him a monthly income of $6,000. Steve makes $100/hour and works 40 hours per week, giving him a monthly income of $16,000. Who is better off?

If you answered Steve, you're wrong. Steve's weekdays, assuming he works a standard Monday through Friday, 9:00am to 5:00pm schedule, consist mostly of *things Steve did not decide to do for himself*. Bob, on the other hand, only has to work three hours each weekday and still makes a livable income. The rest of his day is free to use as he pleases, whether that be supplementing his base income with another job, writing a book and selling it on the Internet (hint, hint), or playing frisbee in the park with his girlfriend.

If life is just a series of experiences, then why do we spend so much of it working for someone else? I prefer to work *only enough to live comfortably* and build the rest of my income myself. Not only is it more exciting and fulfilling to build products, but it offers the opportunity for passive income. Some might say this worldview breeds laziness. Others might be uncomfortable sacrificing perceived security for additional

freedom. Security is an illusion. If you believe yourself to have financial security because you have a diverse stock portfolio, tell that to everyone who lost their fortunes in 2008. Taking responsibility for your own financial well-being is the *only* way to ensure your so-called security. And that starts with aligning yourself as being irreplacable and invaluable.

You can either charge people for your time, or charge people for a product. In both cases, you're spending one resource (your time) in exchange for another (a service rendered or a product built). The relationship between your time and a product might be linear. For instance, if you sell hand-made Star Trek figurines on Etsy, you will need to spend the same amount of time per figurine, regardless of how many you sell.

However, the relationship between your time and a product can and *should* be exponential. Information products, whether an ebook, video tutorial, digital music download, or presentation, need only be produced once but can be duplicated and distributed as many times as your audience demands. This means, despite spending no more time on the 100th copy of your product, you'll still turn the same profit as the first.

AVOID INFO-GLUT

We've engineered a world brimming with information. On numerous occasions catching up with friends, I've known what they were going to say before they said it because I read it on Facebook hours earlier. We're aware of events across the globe moments after they happen. Our attention spans are rapidly shrinking – so much so that I'm surprised you're still reading this book.

There seem to be two polarized camps in the war over pervasiveness of technology in our lives. On one side, the technocrats believe new technology offers a world-changing source of betterment, and that most industries, relationships, and organizations will only be enhanced – never devalued – through its use. In the other camp are the technophobes who believe our modern technology will be the demise of us all. I disagree with both of these extremist views. New technology *is not* our great emancipator, nor will it see our demise if we learn to apply it positively.

Knowledge is power, but information alone is poison. Knowledge is the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Information is only the facts about it. Without experience and applicability, information is a useless and often dangerous distraction.

I used to browse Wikipedia habitually late at night. I read articles on everything from the California Aqueduct to the earthquake potential of the Cascadia Subduction Zone. I read, for instance, that the area beneath my feet right now is due for a megathrust earthquake sometime in the next couple hundred years. I can never un-read that fact. The best I can do now is turn that nugget

of *information* into *knowledge* by preparing an earthquake kit and knowing what to do in case I feel the ground start to shake.

Despite its value for marketing and information dissemination, social media is, generally, productivity's chief adversary. Every status update and tweet you read pollutes your otherwise clear mind with fruitless drivel. And if you use social media daily, you're constantly soaking up useless, atomic tidbits of information with little or no practical application. Even posts adhering to your standard of nobility or virtue compete for your mindshare. Consuming social media stimulates dopamine production in the same way real accomplishment does. Our likes, retweets, re-pins, and upvotes are a sort of 21st century Prozac. Despite satisfying our immediate need for personal connection, our reliance on social media to stimulate our pleasure centers reduces our unique human spirit to uninspired complacency.

As with any diet or reduction strategy, the key to maintaining a healthy information diet is to recognize when you're engaging in unhealthy consumption. If you find yourself in a senseless info-binge, deactivate the source spewing the information immediately.

I recently quit Facebook entirely [10] after recognizing I had a tic-like habit of tabbing away from my work, opening a new browser tab, and checking my Facebook feed. Quitting Facebook has always been on my list, but the slow trickle of dopamine made it hard to stop. I can't tell you the number of hours I've wasted engaging in flamewars on Facebook. We're social creatures and enjoy sharing our thoughts. In fact, I'd go further and say sharing is a *need*. But Facebook enables sharing in a way which encourages ambiguity and discussion about minutiae. If you have something to say, start a blog or write a book.

Over the past few years, push technology has enabled our communication devices to *tell us* when there's something new to ingest instead of waiting for our availability. In my opinion, this is the most time-wasting, paranoia-inducing, and anti-social behavior of all new technology. You wouldn't be okay with solicitors coming to the door every few minutes. Why do you accept such behavior from your smartphone?

My phone is always in silent mode. Not vibrate mode. Silent mode. I miss most calls on purpose, because I'm probably busy doing something which demands my uninterrupted attention.

Turn off all your push notifications on all your devices. That includes all sounds and popup notifications on your computer as well. Don't worry; your email will still be there when you decide to check it later.

Before I moved into the RV, I owned three computers. One of these workstations had three monitors totalling 72" wide. Ironically, these sat in front of the only window in my apartment. At one point, I took photos behind each of the monitors and used them as my desktop background in a sad effort to recover my window view. Having three giant monitors was awfully cool. But the novelty soon wore off, and I realized the productivity gain was negligible relative to the cost of owning three hefty monitors. And I couldn't see out my window anymore.

Now, I have one laptop computer, one tablet computer, and my smartphone. My computer is my productivity center, my tablet my entertainment center, and my smartphone my communication center.

With my transition, I also gave up physical media for good. While I still use pen and paper to jot down notes and ideas for myself,

my book, music, and movie collections are all stored digitally. This is after owning (and transporting) an extensive record and book collection. With the advent of ubiquitous high-speed Internet access, having paper books and vinyl records are more a heavy, unwieldy curse than a blessing.

CONCLUSION

If you ask me to move all of my belongings, I can do it in the time it takes me to drive to their destination. I never have to pack, because my house is my car.

If you ask someone with a large library of books, a giant record collection, all contained in a mortgaged house, to move all of their belongings, it could take them months. Owning fewer things makes you the hare: Nimble, swift, and agile. Owning lots of things renders you a tortoise: Slow and encumbered.

Owning fewer things doesn't make you a *better* person. But it might make you more able to serve others through your newfound freedom.

Life is a series of experiences. Some day, each and every one of us will die, and leave everything we own behind. Everything you choose to carry with you won't matter in the end. All the Christmas cards you've been saving in your filing cabinet, all the old toys you've been saving for the day you have children who might play with them, all the holiday decorations collecting mildew in your basement, all the vinyl records you never listen to. All of them, no matter their sentimental value, won't matter in the end. Why then, do we choose to carry such weight? Is it not more valuable to see more, to do more, to give more, and to live more, than to own more?

I think so.

REFERENCES

1. http://www.amazon.com/Buried-Treasures-Compulsive-Acquiring-Hoarding/dp/0195300580
2. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/01/health/01well.html
3. http://www.dyson.com/store/product.asp?product=DC34-IRSYE-US
4. http://guynameddave.com/about-the-100-thing-challenge/
5. http://tinyhouseblog.com
6. http://www.amazon.com/The-Tiniest-Mansion-Luxury-ebook/dp/B006XLK2LW
7. http://daisybrain.wordpress.com/2011/06/01/retail-tricks/
8. http://www.creditcards.com/credit-card-news/credit-card-industry-facts-personal-debt-statistics-1276.php
9. http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-15.pdf
10. http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=224562897555674