

# Paring Down Your Life

Our lives are overfull.

There's not a single one of us who is free of that trap, in my experience. We say yes to invitations and commitments, we answer as many emails and messages as we can, we join courses and groups, buy books and take on new hobbies, get involved in new relationships and buy more stuff.

The result of this tendency to overfill is predictable:

- We spend too much money and get into too much debt, and then have too much clutter.
- We are always busy and always feel like we're behind on everything.
- We don't have time for what's really important — relationships, meaningful work, solitude and silence, taking care of ourselves.
- We can't really fulfill all of our commitments because we have too much going on.
- We use full lives to distract ourselves from being fully present.

It's understandable that we overfill our lives — we are usually acting on desires, and not giving full contemplation to what we want in our lives and what we don't want.

*'You can't act on your desires alone. You have to contemplate the details of what needs to be removed and what needs to be cultivated.'* ~**Chogyam Trungpa**

So how do we change that? I'd like to propose paring down your life.

## What It Means to Pare Down Your Life

Paring down means to cut back on what you have in your life:

- Cut back on possessions — get rid of the extraneous clutter that is just weighing you down, and find joy in owning little.
- Pare down your commitments — take a look at everything you've committed to doing, from being on committees and boards to coaching and teaching to volunteering and being a part of various projects, and more.
- Pare down your activity online — we spend a lot of time online, usually switching constantly between tabs, cultivating a "switching" and busy mentality. Is this how we want to spend our lives? Can we let go of some of it, and let ourselves be more focused

on fewer online activities?

- Pare down how much you do in a day — we pack our days with lots of things, but what would it be like to do less?
- Pare down hobbies, travel and other aspirational activities — we are filled with random desires to live a life of travel, activity, beauty, interestingness. But fulfilling these desires doesn't often lead to a meaningful life, and instead leads to an overfull life. It's not that we should never do any of these things (I travel and have hobbies), but that we should contemplate what matters most, and pare down to that.

At its core, paring down is about contemplating what you want to cultivate in your life, and what you'd like to remove.

## How to Pare Down

So how do we go about doing this? Isn't decluttering our lives just another thing to add to an overfull list?

Start with a nearly bare canvas.

Imagine for a moment that your life had only a few essentials:

- A room with a mattress, a few changes of clothes, a sweater or jacket, a few books, a computer and a phone. A backpack for carrying things. Maybe a couch and computer desk if needed.
- A bathroom with toilet paper and a shower with soap. Three or four toiletries.
- Simple food of beans, rice, vegetables, fruit, nuts. A few dishes. Maybe a refrigerator, stove and dining table.
- No workout equipment, just walking, hiking, bodyweight strength training. No hobby equipment. Maybe a bike if you need to commute, but walk most places.

These are the bare essentials for most people — there are a few other things you'd need, depending on your circumstances, but let's not get caught up in details.

Now imagine that you could only choose a few things to do each day. For me, that might be:

1. Meaningful work (mostly writing, with some admin tasks needed).
2. Spending time with my family and other meaningful relationships.
3. Reading.
4. Meditating.
5. Exercise.
6. Eating simple foods.

I'd be very happy with just those things in my life! What would your six things be?

Is there anything else you'd like to cultivate? What other things would you add? Imagine a stripped-down, bare life, pared down to *your* essentials.

Now contemplate what could be removed to make room for just these. Leave space in your life for doing nothing. For contemplation. For being present. For silence and stillness. For the unexpected.

I realize that life won't always be this simple, and that we have to be willing to flow with things we can't control. We can't always pare down commitments that we need to fulfill. We can't always have a job with meaningful work. Relationships can complicate things. I get it.

But sometimes, we're just making excuses not to let go. Rationalizing the status quo. Holding on to our attachments.

Paring down asks you to let go of attachments, let go of rationalizing, let go of fixed beliefs. And see what's possible once you do let go.