



This Is Your Life Podcast

Season 3, Episode 12

Published: April 1, 2015

Michael Hyatt

Michele Cushatt: Welcome to *This Is Your Life* with Michael Hyatt, where our goal is to give you the clarity, courage, and commitment you need to do what matters. My name is Michele Cushatt. I'm your cohost today, and I'm sitting in the studio with Michael Hyatt. Hey there, Michael!

Michael Hyatt: Hey, Michele!

Michele: But we have a little surprise for you today because we don't have just Michael Hyatt in the studio. We also have bestselling author Greg McKeown, author of *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*.

Greg McKeown: It's great to be with you!

Michele: It's good to have you here, Greg.

Michael: Welcome!

Michele: Now I was going to do this big, huge, profound introduction including fabulous credentials from your bio and all kinds of information, but the truth is that one month ago, you were in Norway because you were invited to speak at a conference by the prince of Norway.

Greg: The prince of Norway! Exactly!

Michele: Honestly, that kind of trumps everything else in your bio.

Greg: It's my saving grace. It's the only thing I actually have to offer. It saves me from a rather lackluster bio.

Michael: You're almost royalty.

Michele: Yes, you are. I mean, I read your bio and I was intimidated, but then when I found out about the prince of Norway... I mean, I'm like choking with fear now.

Greg: Norway was fantastic. I do have to say this. I absolutely love the people in Norway and found examples of essentialists right there.

Michael: Really?

Greg: Yes!

Michele: That's wonderful!

Greg: Yes!

Michele: The message is really getting around. Before we talk any more about the book, I really want you to describe kind of the heart of this book as succinctly as you can.

Greg: Oh. Well, I was going to tell you a story first. Can I tell you a story first?

Michele: Tell a story first, and then we'll get into that.

Greg: Okay. This is where it all came from.

Michele: Okay.

Greg: I will get to the question you asked.

Michele: Okay, you got it.

Greg: It all started 15 years ago, when I was at law school in England. I would have just continued on that path, but a friend of mine sent me tickets to come to his wedding, so I came to the US. In passing, someone said to me, "Look, if you do decide to stay in America, you should..." They said things I should do. What I did was spend the next 20 minutes thinking about the question, "What would you do if you could do anything?"

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: Up to that point, I had sort of felt logically like you could choose to do something different, but in the end, emotionally I didn't feel like I could do something different. If you don't emotionally feel like you can do something different, then you don't really have a choice. So when I looked at a piece of paper in my hands that contained all of these things, these brainstorm and arrows, what I noticed was not so much what was on the list as what was not on the list.

Michael: Ahh.

Greg: Law school was not on the list. As I already mentioned, I was at law school. So what do you do? I decided, "I had better call the 15-digit number back to England." My mother answered, perhaps fortunately. She listened for a while. Then she finally said, "I think you had better talk to dad." Okay, let's pause for a second. What would you say to your son after all of that time, all of that money, and all of that effort? What would you say?

Michael: "You're kidding me!"

Greg: If I were on the phone with you, that's what you'd say?

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: Let's play this out for a moment. "Well, no, I'm not kidding you. I really am thinking about this. I think that maybe law school is not the thing."

Michael: "Son, aren't you just maybe going through a phase?"

Greg: "Well, I think I am going through a phase, but it might be a good phase!"

Michele: "Can we get the phase to pass a little quickly?"

Greg: "Well, yes, because I just want to get out of this. This isn't the thing for me."

Michael: "What makes you think that?"

Greg: "Something else. I want to do something else. I want to teach and write." Okay, this is good. This is not what he said. Just some context... For my whole life, what he had said to me was one thing. He had said, "Keep your options open. Go to law school. That's excellent. That keeps your options open."

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: So this is what I was expecting. After he listened, he said, "Look, son, you know what I've always told you." You know what I was waiting for. He said, "To thine own self be true," which he had never said to me in his whole life. But then and there (because all Englishmen quote Shakespeare over tea and crumpets for breakfast in the morning), he pulled out a line from Hamlet. Polonius was speaking to his son. "To thine own self be true." My dad followed it up with this phrase. "Do what is right. Let the consequences follow."

Michele: Wow!

Greg: This is the moment. He didn't always get it right, but he got it right in that moment.

Michele: That's impressive.

Michael: That's fantastic.

Greg: Yes. There are a few lessons in that little story, but among them is the idea that there are just two different approaches to life. One is to do sort of everything popular now, everything you've been doing, to stay with it, stay committed, and follow through. The other is to do the right thing for the right reasons at the right time.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: In that second philosophy, I found in that moment seeds of what I have gone on to do.

Michael: Wow. There's a big difference between those two philosophies.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: Yeah, they're totally different. I mean, what was on the piece of paper was basically a question. The question was, "Why do otherwise successful people not break through to the next level?" It's a non-trivial question because if we three were to have a race and you were to win (which you would)...

Michael: Michele would.

Michele: I'm not so sure about that.

Greg: It would be Michele, and then Michael, and then me, right? I would be 10 yards behind you both. Then we would have another race with me starting off 10 yards behind you at the beginning. Surely you would win a second time? If we continued doing that, you would win again and again and again. Yet what we find is that successful people, teams, and companies do not continue in this trajectory.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: It's a fascinating question to me. Why? Why don't they break through to the next level?

Michele: So why do they stay plateaued rather than moving ahead?

Greg: Yes! Why do they have this momentum for a time, and then it goes down?

Michele: It just kind of stalls.

Greg: Yeah. What do you think? What are your thoughts on this question?

Michael: I think that oftentimes the very things that look like opportunities are the things that later on distract us and derail us.

Greg: Yeah.

Michael: Then our opportunities become the threats.

Greg: Yeah. You've stolen the thunder.

Michael: I've read your book.

Greg: Yeah, but this is exactly the right idea. Because of all of the options and opportunities that come with the things we're doing, success can become a catalyst for failure if we're not very careful at becoming successful at success. I was talking to somebody just a couple of days ago, and he was describing all of the amazing things he's doing and has done. It's consuming every minute of his life.

Michael: Yes.

Greg: There is no space. It's a mathematical idea, right? There's just no space to think about what the very best and highest use of yourself is. You just get consumed at the current level. The problem is that success can lead to what Jim Collins has called the "undisciplined pursuit of more."

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: I want you to think about that phrase for a second. What is that? What does the undisciplined pursuit of more look like? Actually, what does it look like for you, Michael?

Michael: Well, it looks like I become reactive and, by virtue of the fact that I get an invitation or request to do something; therefore, I must do it. I forget that I have a choice. I don't have to do everything I'm invited to do.

Greg: Right.

Michael: So I just keep trying to stuff (without tradeoff) more stuff into my already packed life, and before long I have no margin, no space to breathe in.

Greg: Yeah. Oh, I love that description. One of the things I've noticed is that over time, the very nature of success is that the opportunities coming to you are the very opportunities you wanted to come to you a year ago or two years ago.

Michele: Yes.

Michael: Right.

Greg: So if we just maintain the current level of expectation of success, we'll keep saying yes to these things because they are exactly what we wanted.

Michael: Yep.

Greg: We do that instead of becoming more and more discerning. So I've come to believe people will plateau at exactly the same level as their selectivity plateaus.

Michael: Okay, unpack that a bit.

Michele: I was going to say... That's really profound right there. Say that one more time.

Greg: Okay. Well, I'll give an example of this. I co-designed a class at the design school at Stanford called Designing Life Essentially. It was one of their new pop-up classes, and it turned out to be the most requested class and then the most popular afterward when the feedback came in. So this was great, and I loved it. Then they came to me afterward and said, "Look. Would you like to continue working on this class and maybe even be a faculty member at Stanford as an option?"

Well, a year before, that was exactly what I had wanted to do. That's why I was interested in pursuing it in the first place. But by the time the opportunity had come, I suddenly didn't feel great about it anymore. I was in this tense place of, "You have the thing you wanted, but now you're at a point where you ought not to do it anymore," so I really struggled with that.

Michele: Those are the places where the decisions are hardest.

Greg: These are the hard decisions.

Michele: And these are the life-changing decisions. I mean, really, they are course-changing decisions.

Greg: I think so, because you are really not just deciding on the specific decision that has just come to you. You're deciding what your criteria for saying yes are, and you're deciding whether or not your criteria will become more selective.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: If you conclude the answer is yes, it's hard. You're saying no to something now, but you're doing it so you can open yourself up to the next level of opportunities to pursue.

Michele: But that saying no is very difficult because it feels very risky, because what if opportunities dry up and don't present themselves anymore?

Greg: Yeah. Yes.

Michele: You think, "What if this is the last time opportunity will come by, and I've said no?"

Greg: Yes.

Michele: Or, "What if this no ends up shutting down other opportunities?" It feels very risky to say no.

Greg: I think it's very tough. I had a friend read *Essentialism*, and they said, "It should come with a warning that this is the hardest thing you'll ever do."

Michele: Uh-huh.

Michael: Yes.

Greg: I knew it was hard when I wrote the book, and I knew it was countercultural when I wrote it, but I have come to the conclusion that it is more difficult and more countercultural than I realized when I was writing it.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: Because the antidote to this problem of the undisciplined pursuit of more is the disciplined pursuit of less but better. That language is important. It's a pursuit. It's not something you arrive at.

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: It's not something you can check off the list. In fact, there are times when I'll do keynotes about essentialism and someone will say afterward, "Oh, that was such a great reminder." Actually, they're missing the whole point.

Michael: Yes.

Greg: Because it's not one more thing. Essentialism is not one more thing.

Michael: It's more than that.

Greg: It is the perpetual pursuit. It is the very work of our lives to figure out what's important now and be willing to eliminate anything that isn't the answer to that question.

Michael: Could you go to the metaphor of the closet that you used in the book?

Greg: Yes!

Michael: Whenever I'm trying to explain to people why they should read the book, I just tell that story that you do so beautifully in the book.

Greg: Yes. First of all, anyone listening or watching right now can imagine... Just think about your closet. What does it look like? I know how it looks. You don't touch it. You don't think about it. You never organize it, and it's still somehow pristinely clean with only the things you love to wear and no clutter in there.

Michael: Right.

Greg: Right?

Michele: No.

Michael: That's mine. Is that yours, Michele?

Michele: Of course!

Greg: Of course not! Sometimes people think, “Well, the answer is a larger closet.” They think that until they get a larger closet, and then they realize that is not the problem. The problem is something else. The problem is the undisciplined pursuit of more. What happens is that over time you’re putting in these clothes. You’re putting in these things. Then when you occasionally consider that it’s too overwhelming, you say, “I’m going to take something off of the hanger.”

Michele: No. You say you’re going to clean your closet, and you pull out like one item.

Greg: Right.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah.

Michele: “I’m going to donate this.”

Greg: Right. You may do it. But then let’s say you get to the second item and go to pull it out. There’s something that happens in the process of taking it out. Actually, it’s an important neurological thing. It’s called the *endowment effect*. In the process of taking it out, you become more aware of your ownership of that item, and the problem with the endowment effect is that we overvalue things.

Because we own them, we think they’re more valuable than they really are. That means it goes back on the hanger. Or maybe we use very general criteria. Maybe we look at that item and say, “Well, maybe I’ll be able to fit into it again one day.”

Michael: Yes. I’ve done that.

Greg: Or, “Maybe it’s going to come back into fashion at some point.” If that’s the question you ask, the answer is definitely yes. It could come into fashion at some point somewhere in the future, so it goes back on the shelf.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: This is the nonessentialist way to closet management. The alternative is to say, “Look, do I absolutely love it? Is it something I wear often?” If the answer to those questions is no, then eliminate it.

Michael: Get rid of it.

Greg: One of the tricks to overcoming the endowment effect is to simply ask, “If I didn’t own it right now, how much would I pay for it today? How hard would I work for it now?”

Michael: Yes. I love that.

Greg: The book is not about closets, as you obviously know. This is simply a metaphor for the overstuffed lives we are living today where you have so many... In fact, it's not just that we put our own stuff into the closet. It's that other people are stuffing things into our closets every day.

Michael: Totally. Yeah.

Greg: We clean them out in the morning, and then we get back to our closets and they're packed full of other people's things.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: I mean, how many times has your email inbox gotten longer by the end of the day?

Michael: Right.

Greg: How many times have you found the to-do list longer by the end of the day?

Michele: Yes. Exactly.

Greg: How many times have we just lived days when we've felt like we've been busy but not productive?

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Too often.

Greg: How often do we feel stretched too thin at work or at home?

Michael: Before we get too far afield from this, I want to kind of go back to where we started. You talked about law school, but what was the more immediate thing that led to your wrestling through this and coming to the conclusion? What was it in your life or your observation or work that made you see that the answer was what you wrote in the book?

Greg: There are just different chapters to every story. The first chapter I already mentioned. Another chapter was more personal and happened not so very long ago, just a few years ago. I was working, and my wife was expecting one of our daughters. Earlier on in the week, my boss at the time had sent me an email saying, "Look, Friday would be a very bad time to have this baby, because I need you to be at this client meeting," and so on.

Michael: As if.

Greg: I thought they were joking, but sometimes these things have a lingering effect on us.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: It did for me. Friday was, indeed, the day our daughter was born.

Michele: As luck would have it...

Greg: As luck would have it. I was in the hospital. The baby was born. She was a healthy baby. It should have been this absolutely joyous moment when I was focused only on that thing. But actually, I was torn between this client meeting and sense of pressure... "I ought to be there." With all of the conviction I could muster, I said, "Yes," and I went. I was picked up at the hospital by my manager at the time. I was taken to this meeting. After the meeting, they said to me, "The client will respect you for the choice you made."

Michael: Wow.

Greg: Well, look. I don't know if it's true, right? I don't know if that happened, but even if it did and even if some amazing thing had happened in that meeting, surely I had made a fool's bargain. Surely this was not the thing to have done.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: That was another sort of catalytic moment for me of... Well, first of all, the lesson is that if you don't prioritize your life, someone else will.

Michael: Exactly. Yeah.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: This is not a mutual game we're playing. Secondly, how was it possible that I had allowed my life to be there? How was it possible that I had given so much permission to other people that I had felt that this was an acceptable choice to make or the right thing to do? That was one key moment of looking back where I said, "No. This is not another subject. This is the subject. I want to really go into this."

Michael: Did you realize it immediately, or did it take a while for you as you reflected upon this to come to this awareness that there had to be another way?

Greg: Yeah. It was a reflection, looking back.

Michael: Yeah.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: There are lots of examples through that same period where I found myself being torn between the things that really mattered and the things that were just proximate. So as I looked back through the journey, when I found that story again, when I thought about that story, I thought, “How off can you be?”

Michele: Uh-huh.

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: “How off track can you get?”

Michele: You can get that far off track and almost not even realize it’s happening. You’re almost like a character in somebody else’s story. You don’t even realize it’s happening.

Greg: That’s a great description, and I think this is, in lots of ways, what the modern culture is giving us.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: This idea of the undisciplined pursuit of more isn’t just an individual thing. It’s a cultural thing.

Michele: It is. It is.

Greg: I mean, what is the culture of our day? There are so many examples we could give, but think about how people use their phones.

Michael: Yes!

Michele: We could just do a whole episode right there.

Greg: We could do a whole thing on this! We could. A person who sent me tickets for my wedding and works with me now, called me up and he said, “Yeah, I just took email off of my phone.” This is just an example. My first reaction to this was, “Can you do that?”

Michael: Is that even possible?

Michele: Is it not going to combust?

Greg: Technically, can you not have email on your phone? It took me about 15 minutes to think about what I actually use it for and whether or not there’s a way to work around it. I took it off. That’s the best thing ever. I did it with a load of other apps as well until now, when my phone is a boring instrument. It actually just has utility for what I need it for. Instead of it being this constant distraction from the things that matter, this ever-tapping presence in my life, there’s nothing there. I remember

that for a couple of weeks afterward, I would still check my phone pretty frequently, and there was nothing there to see.

Michael: It's almost reflexive.

Michele: Yeah. Automatic.

Greg: I did it completely habitually, completely addictively.

Michele: Which is, to your point, why this is a disciplined pursuit of less.

Greg: Yeah.

Michele: It's not just going to happen automatically.

Greg: No, it's not.

Michele: We're almost trained culturally to do something different. We have to do this disciplined pursuit of less. Well, we have so much more. We're going to take a short break, but stick with us. We have much more to come with Greg McKeown. We'll be right back.

Michael: As a busy and successful blogger, podcaster, author, speaker, and consultant, I'm constantly asked about the tools I use to get it all done. Now for the first time, I'm going to pull back the curtain and let you peek inside my toolbox to see the software and hardware I use for everything from blogging and podcasting to productivity, social media, and speaking, plus so much more. You can't buy *Inside My Toolbox*, but you can get it for free by subscribing to my free email newsletter.

When you subscribe, you'll receive my newest content right in your inbox. You'll never have to worry about missing an important post or update again. To get your free copy of the *Inside My Toolbox* ebook, visit michaelhyatt.com and enter your name and email address into the form on the page. Don't waste any more time or money using the wrong tools. Sign up today at michaelhyatt.com.

Michele: All right, we're back. Today we're in the studio with Michael Hyatt and *New York Times* bestselling author Greg McKeown. We're talking about his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. You know, we've spent the first half of this program really talking kind of philosophically about the concept of the book and what was really the impetus behind it, but I kind of want to break it down. This is what I'm going to ask you. If you were a doctor and you were diagnosing our culture, what would you say our disease was?

Greg: The disease of nonessentialism is one idea, and the idea is that if you can fit it all in, you can have it all. The problem with that idea is that it's not true. That's the problem. It sounds like you'd want that thing, and if it were true, then your behavior would be very predictable.

Michele: Appropriate. Yeah.

Greg: You'd just fill your calendar up. You'd sleep less. You'd be as efficient as you could be with every part of that meeting so you could stuff everything in.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: In fact, I had somebody come up to me recently and say, "Oh, I have slept an average of four hours a night for the last two weeks," and they were happy about it! They were smiling about it because busyness has become this sort of bogus badge of honor.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: I think that's the disease. It's an idea that has been sold to us, but it's just a bill of goods.

Michael: Where does that come from? Is there something psychologically driving that?

Greg: Oh, I think that's really an interesting question. I don't know how deep we want to go, but I think there have been like three generations of this idea, actually. You have the Industrial Revolution that introduced the idea that if you can just create a system that's fast and efficient enough, you can have these...

Michele: Factory production, right?

Greg: Factory production.

Michele: Factory production. We want to make it faster and tighter.

Greg: Exactly. As the Industrial Revolution took place, the organizations we built around them were built on the same kinds of factory assumptions.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: Which actually didn't turn out to be so great for the humans involved.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: So you have that as generation one. Generation two is like after World War II. This is what I call *panem et circenses*, which is the Latin for bread and circuses. It's the idea that there was this sort of consumerism movement as people came back from World War II. Certainly in the US there was financial success from the war.

There was also just a desire for being distracted from this terrible experience that had discombobulated the whole world. So that was phase two. Phase three is the last 10 years, when we've gone from being connected to being hyper-connected. In that phase it's not just information overload anymore. It's opinion overload.

Michael: Wow.

Greg: That's a different challenge. This is where there are really a lot of people who get a vote in our lives.

Michele: And permission in our lives. We are randomly and without consideration giving permission too.

Michael: Indiscriminately.

Michele: Yeah, indiscriminately.

Greg: It's exactly so. So anyway, this is the disease. The disease is the idea that if you can fit it all in, you can have it all.

Michele: And that's not true. So now that we know the disease... I mean, it's powerful.

Greg: It's powerful.

Michele: I honestly think it's a terminal disease.

Greg: Yeah.

Michele: We cannot continue at this place, so what's the cure?

Greg: Well, I have a story.

Michele: Okay.

Greg: Somebody who was on both sides of this problem... First of all, this is a true story. An executive in Silicon Valley is doing terrific work, focused work, and has space to think and create and all of that. But then his company gets purchased by a larger, more bureaucratic firm. He is in this other company, and he wants to be a good citizen. He wants to fit it all in.

He wants to say yes to every meeting, and he does, but he finds that his stress is going up as the quality of his work is going down. For a while, he thinks about leaving the company, but then he talks to somebody who says, "Look, what you really need to do is hold a personal quarterly off-site. You need to create some space to think."

He does that, and as he does it, he realizes, "Actually, I want to be at this company, but I want a different approach." So he says, "I'm going to retire in role." Now he's much more selective about what he does, and he finds that two things happen. The quality of his life goes up at home. He says, "I got my life back." The phone goes off at a certain time every night.

He eats dinner with his wife, goes to the gym, and gets his life back. But what he also gets is the regeneration that the new approach gives him to have space to contribute better at work as well. By the end of that year, his performance evaluations at work have gone up, and he ends that year with one of the largest bonuses of his whole career.

Michael: Wow.

Greg: The key to the whole story is not saying no. I didn't write a book, incidentally, about no-ism, all right? It's not just about saying no to people and things randomly.

Michele: By the way, no-ism wouldn't have been nearly as catchy, just in case you...

Greg: I appreciate that.

Michele: That's my little bit of advice for you.

Greg: In case I think about another book.

Michele: Yeah.

Greg: What it's about is creating space to think, to ask the hard questions, the big questions.

Michele: Which truly is proactive rather than reactive, right?

Greg: It is.

Michele: So rather than just being in a responsive mode, the key is to actually stop and pull yourself back. That's creating the space.

Greg: It is.

Michele: And it's intentionally thinking through it rather than just so quickly responding and reacting.

Greg: This is exactly right. So what can you do to create space? I already mentioned one idea, but I'm going to keep on it.

Michael: Yeah. Please.

Greg: A personal quarterly off-site is key.

Michele: Okay.

Greg: See, everybody wants (a little ironically)... "What are the 10 things you need to do to become an essentialist?" Right?

Michael: Right.

Greg: They want a list of a ton of things.

Michael: "I want more stuff."

Greg: They want more things. Actually, the book does have a whole set of suggestions of what they can do, how to say no in a savvy way, how to negotiate nonessentials, and all sorts of things. But in the end, there's one thing. It has taken me a long time to get to it. It's this personal quarterly off-site. Every 90 days, you take a day. You evaluate what you've been doing during the last 90 days.

You have what I call the most important hour of your life, which is when you go through a set of questions. I'll mention those in a moment. Then you set your (very few) goals for the next 90 days to make sure you're in alignment with what you really want to do ultimately with your life. This is it. So actually, when people ask (as people almost always do), "Okay, that's a good suggestion, but can you give me the next one?" I just say, "No."

Michele: "Go back to..."

Michael: "This is it."

Greg: "This is it." Just actually do it. Don't go, "Oh, that's an interesting, curious idea." Do it. Schedule it. Prepare for it.

Michele: Every 90 days.

Greg: Every 90 days.

Michele: It doesn't mean you have to jump on a plane and go somewhere.

Greg: It doesn't.

Michele: But just one day off-site...

Michael: You could do it anywhere. Yeah.

Michele: You could do it anywhere.

Greg: You could.

Michael: So the idea is that this is an opportunity for you to poke your head above the clouds and kind of get some perspective about your life and where it's going.

Greg: That's right.

Michele: Just to make sure we're very clear (if you could speak to this)... This isn't a day where you go and catch up on email. It's a thinking day.

Greg: Oh yes. It's completely...

Michele: It's not a task day.

Greg: It's a digital-free day.

Michael: Ahh. That's very important.

Greg: It is important. As with any quarterly off-site... Imagine leaders inside of companies. We would expect them to have quarterly off-sites to think about the strategy and overall perspective of the company. In fact, we would say it was their fiduciary responsibility. If they're not doing that, they are doing something really wrong.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: Yet in our own lives, how many of us are applying that same logic to what we do? When was the last time you had a personal quarterly off-site? Right? Yes. It's hard to do this.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: It's hard to apply it. It's hard because it's not a norm, but it could be. How do you make a quarterly off-site successful? You prepare for it.

Michele: Okay.

Greg: You don't just turn up. I keep a journal really faithfully every single day. In that, I'm writing what's going on, what I'm thankful for, and what the most important memories I've made are. I answer a whole series of questions. I bring that to the personal quarterly off-site. The first thing I'm doing is just reviewing. "Where am I?"

Michele: You're reviewing the previous 90 days?

Greg: Yes. Yes.

Michele: Okay.

Greg: What is the news in my life? Am I focused on the things that really matter most to me? Where am I spending my time and resources?

Michele: You're basically being an investigator of your own life.

Greg: Exactly. I'm being a journalist.

Michele: Yeah, I was just going to say you were a journalist too. That's what I'm thinking.

Greg: Exactly. You can carry that metaphor through because the idea is first to be a journalist and then, ultimately, after the personal quarterly off-site, it's to become an editor.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: Or maybe that's really the metaphor for the time you're there. What's the news? Then, secondly, what's really essential? You can break that down in a few ways. One way is to simply ask, "What are the three most important goals for my life?" Until you've answered those questions, all of the other questions of prioritization are unanswerable.

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: Because you have to have somewhere to anchor that question. "What is ultimately most important to me?" From there, you can work backward. "Okay. Well, therefore, what do I want to do over the next 5-10 years?" Ultimately, you have a 90-day plan.

Michael: What's the role of your calendar in that as you're prospectively looking to the next quarter, the next 90 days?

Greg: Yeah. I think there are two elements. One is that I suggest that people actually print out their calendars from the last 90 days, whether they have a journal or not.

Michael: Okay.

Greg: If they don't have a journal, it's totally required so they have some sense of where they've been, what their time is being spent on currently.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: Then it's the same thing. You then review the next 90 days and say, "Look, what am I already committed to? What's on here? Are these the things that really are essential, or are they no longer the things I should be doing?" It's a time to un-commit to things.

Michael: Okay, I want to ask you about this.

Greg: Yes.

Michael: This is really important because... Let's say you're reviewing. You have these goals. You realize that for whatever reason (maybe it was your own lack of clarity or an assistant not doing their job or whatever), now all of a sudden your calendar is populated with nonessential items.

Greg: Right.

Michael: What are your options in that situation?

Michele: Oh, that's a good question.

Greg: Yeah. Let me just give you one rule of thumb that I have found helpful. Sometimes essentialism can be misunderstood as being less helpful, less service-oriented.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: I don't believe that at all. I think it's about being the most helpful, making the greatest contribution you possibly can with your life.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Michael: Yep.

Greg: So that's the justification for changing anything that's on the calendar, anything you've previously committed to. I find it helpful, for example, to have one day to give back a month. If I have requests... I could do whatever.

Michael: I do the same thing.

Greg: It's bound, so it isn't that you say yes to every request you get that would be helpful to someone. You say, "Yes, and this is the amount of time." Once that's filled, you can move it on to the next month. I think that as soon as you realize something is on the calendar that really shouldn't be there, especially if you're planning in a 90-day cycle, you have some time to un-commit to it and simply let people know.

"You know what? I signed up for this. I don't think I could do a great job for you. I could do it, but I think it's not the very best way for me to be able to help you. What I can do instead is this. This person could help instead." Or you can just say, "It's just no longer a fit for me." Now does that create a withdrawal in the relationship? Yes.

Michele: There's a payment. There's a cost regardless.

Greg: There is.

Michele: So you're choosing what bill you're going to acquire.

Greg: Precisely. If one were going to write the sort of manifesto for a nonessentialist life, at the top of that would be, "Pretend there are no tradeoffs."

Michele: Yes.

Michael: This is huge.

Greg: Because if there are no tradeoffs, you can say yes to everything and that will be fine.

Michael: Right.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: But there are tradeoffs. We didn't get to choose those rules. Those rules are permanent and eternal. We live with them. So now the choice is, "What are the right tradeoffs to make?"

Michael: Yes.

Greg: Suddenly you are in the role of a strategist in your life, an essentialist saying, "Of these tradeoffs, which is the strategic choice I want to make?"

Michael: Now here's where I get hung up in this. Let's say I've made a commitment at 60 days out. I've given my word to this. This is how I kind of invest it with this whole sense of integrity.

Michele: I do the same.

Greg: Mm-hmm.

Michael: I don't have any problem with trying to negotiate out of it or providing an alternative, but if the other person says, "No, I really want you to do it," and I've committed to it, and they've planned on that, then I feel like I have to follow through. Next time I'll be smarter, but I have to fulfill the commitment.

Greg: Yeah. I think this is important. I mean, essentialism is not somehow trying to pretend that integrity doesn't matter. It does matter. I think there are absolutely times when we've made a commitment and we will be there because we said we would. I think you can always negotiate, and we ought to remember that.

Michael: Yes.

Greg: But if it really is a problem and if we really have given our word, of course.

Michael: Then we're going to do it.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: This is important too, but we have to learn the lesson.

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: It's very cheap in life to say, "Yes, we just learn our lessons from this," but we don't necessarily learn the lessons. The lesson is that every time someone asks us for something, we put in a buffer. "Let me get back to you. Let me think about that." Then we get good at preparing and going back to people and saying, "Look, it's a great opportunity. It's a wonderful thing you've asked me to do, and I'm very honored, but I just don't think I can sign up for it right now. I just don't think I can do a great job for you on this right now. There are other commitments I already have."

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: We have to get really strong in that, and I think we are often not at all strong in doing that.

Michael: No. Because it's easier to go with the flow (especially if you're a recovering people pleaser like I am and I know Michele is) than to say no.

Greg: Right.

Michele: Yes.

Michael: I don't have so much trouble saying no to my friends. Actually, I want to say yes to them, so I want more of that in my life, but it's these kinds of people who are in the middle (they're not total strangers, but I have some affiliation or connection with them) who make a request. If I look at it in isolation from the context of my life, it's perfectly reasonable.

Greg: Right.

Michael: It's not a big request.

Greg: Right.

Michael: It's just that if you put 100 of those things together, my whole life goes that direction.

Greg: Yeah, so there's the 100-thing problem you just described, but there's also just the *planning fallacy*. The planning fallacy is well established in the literature as a sort of almost universal human weakness.

Michael: Oh, I love this.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: We underestimate the time things will take to do.

Michele: Yes. Oh goodness.

Greg: Think of how rare is it that you take on a project, a task, or a request, and it is completed faster than you thought it would be.

Michael: Uh, never.

Michele: I'm trying to think of whether or not that has ever happened.

Greg: It's in the range of never.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: Compare that to the number of times it has taken longer. It always takes longer.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: That's the thing you have to remember: the total cost of ownership of any request that comes your way.

Michael: Yeah.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: Say, "Look. How long does it really take to do that one keynote, that one recording, that one meeting, that one...?" It's not one!

Michele: Yes.

Michael: That one podcast.

Greg: Yeah. Right. Exactly. "What am I thinking?" No, you really do have to be as thoughtful as possible. Now the key (I'll say again) is not to get better at saying no, although that can be helpful. The key is not to even be better at negotiating, even though that can be helpful. It's to create space, to get to clarity about what is essential. It's creating space that's the real habit we have to develop. That's why I come back again and again to the personal quarterly off-site.

Michele: Because that really is key.

Michele: Okay, I want to go back to this buffer idea because I think there's something in here that I need to hear and I'm sure our listeners need to hear. If you get a request, you're not quick to respond? You're going to give yourself a little space so you can think about it and consult a larger context before you reply?

Greg: Yeah, that's right.

Michael: I mean, the quarterly review is obviously hugely helpful for that.

Michele: But you've memorized kind of a go-to phrase when you get a request. "Let me get back to you. Let me have some time to think about it. I'll get back to you."

Greg: Yeah. I mean, I learned this from somebody who was so hungry to serve that she would go to church and everyone would come up to her because they knew she was somebody who would get stuff done.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: They would say, "Look, will you do this thing?" She would say yes. One person after another would come to her and give their extra piece of clothing to put into the closet, and she would say yes. She would go home and go, "This is crazy! I have children. I have life, and I've just signed up for all of these people because I believed I was doing something right!"

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: I mean, the principle is that doing something that is good is not good enough.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: That's not sufficiently selective criteria for what we do in our lives, and this is when she learned this simple lesson, which was just to pause. "Let me check my calendar, and I'll get back to you."

Michael: Yeah.

Greg: The pause allowed her to think about it. Sometimes it was necessary to think about it for days. Then she could figure out what she could and couldn't do. So yes, I think this is a critical part of creating space.

Michael: So helpful. One of the other things the book helped me to do is reframe this idea of a tradeoff. It's not really about saying no to certain things, but it's really about being very clear about what I want to say yes to.

Greg: Yeah.

Michael: Because you can't do one without the other.

Greg: You can't do one without the other. I didn't ever intend to write a book that was about courage, but in the end it is about internal clarity and courage compared to external social pressure.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: This is what it comes down to. I want to sort of elevate our conversation even one step further by saying this principle is certainly not just a time management thing and certainly not just a professional thing. This is the life principle, right?

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: At the end of our lives, we have regrets. Those who have gathered any sort of data on those regrets have found some pretty interesting patterns. Bronnie Ware is an Australian nurse who gathered a set of interviews. What was the number one regret of the dying? It was living a life that others expected of them rather than a life that was true to the voice within.

Michele: That's so powerful.

Greg: Nobody set a goal to do that. Nobody intended to have that regret. The number two regret was spending too much time at work and not enough time with family and those who mattered most. Okay, nobody ever set a goal for that regret either. So we have an interesting situation where people (smart, driven, intelligent people) find themselves in a position they never intended to get to.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: That's something that should be sobering to us because they were just as smart as us, as thoughtful as us, and as caring as us, and they still found themselves where they didn't mean to be: a strategic endpoint that was not intentional. So you have to somehow attach your daily planning process, your daily reflection process, to that end game state. You say, "On my deathbed, what will I hope I did today?" I think there are a few things you can do to try and get in range of that.

Michele: I would say most of our listeners at this point are saying, "Hear, hear! I'm with you. I agree." Right? Most people are hearing and going, "That's the kind of life I want to live."

Greg: Right.

Michele: But good intentions only take us so far.

Greg: Right.

Michele: I'm sure that even as you've been living this out over the last few years, you've hit a couple of walls at times where you've had good intentions but not always kind of followed through on what you intended on. So what is the key to getting us to actually move forward beyond thinking this is a good concept and actually start living this out? How do we get over that hump?

Greg: Okay. As listeners are listening to this right now, as they're watching this, they should (in whatever way they want) pause it and text somebody. Maybe that sounds a little bit funny after everything we said about digital overdose, but text somebody or call them. Somehow reach out and say, "I want you and me to schedule a personal quarterly off-site."

Michele: Okay.

Greg: "Let's plan for that. Let's decide where we're going to go. Let's go somewhere that's meaningful, maybe somewhere in nature. It doesn't have to be expensive, but just somewhere. We can go to the beach, out to the woods, or wherever the place is. We're going to ask a series of questions and really evaluate where we are, where we want to be, and the very few things that are going to be invested in during the next 90 days." I really still think it comes back to that, but I think you need the social, positive peer pressure to do it.

Michele: You need kind of the accountability or partnership in the journey?

Michael: Hey, that's good. That's really good.

Michele: That's great, great advice. Okay, I have one final question for you before we wrap up today. This is personal. Michael and I are both authors, so we know a book takes years to write. We live with the content. We wrestle with it. I want to ask you to be completely honest. Do you still continue to follow these principles? Do you do the quarterly getaway yourself?

Greg: Yeah.

Michele: And have you gained any new insights or new perspectives as you've been wrestling with this process yourself and living it out?

Greg: Yeah. Oh, there are loads of thoughts about that in my mind. The first risk of overemphasizing this personal quarterly off-site idea... That isn't in the book at all, so that suggestion or idea isn't in there.

Michele: It came as a result of your wrestling with it?

Greg: It has. It has grown out of both what I have done and what I now see as this essential thing for me to be doing to deal with all of the additional things.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: So yeah, you bet. This book... Suddenly you have far more opportunities coming your way than you had before. You have lots of people asking you, "Okay, what's the next book?" Incidentally, the answer is, "Maybe there won't be one," right?

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: I'm not assuming there will be. Lots of people want you to do training, because that would be helpful. Suddenly you have all of these different business opportunities, and I've been wrestling so hard with these things.

Michael: I'll bet.

Greg: Yes, I've been doing the personal quarterly off-sites. We've said, "No, we're not doing training. No, we're not going to do all of these things." We've been saying no to all sorts of keynote opportunities that just aren't exactly the right fit for us. What we have concluded that we're going to do professionally... I know what the next big thing is. We're going to have a group of really selectively picked early adopters of essentialism who will come together for a class, I suppose, or a forum or fellowship, every 90 days for a year.

Michele: Oh wow.

Michael: Oh, I love that.

Greg: We'll do it in Silicon Valley. We'll really handpick select people, and then we'll see how that goes. Maybe we'll do two or three of those throughout the course of next year. This is the one thing we want to do. We think we'll learn a lot through the process. We think that if we choose the right people, we'll still make a big impact beyond the people in that room. We think they will be able to be the evangelists for what they learn to their communities, to their influence groups.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Greg: Suddenly I can see this being something that makes a little dent in the universe.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Yes. It could change some culture, which is really what we need to do.

Greg: It could change some culture.

Michael: Yeah, I love that.

Greg: Yeah.

Michael: Fantastic.

Michele: I'm assuming it's still a struggle for you too at times. It's a process. Like you say in the book, it's the disciplined pursuit of less, so you're still disciplining yourself. You're still pursuing the essentialist life.

Greg: All the time. To me it is a serious challenge. I don't think of myself in any of this conversation as holier-than-thou with anybody else.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: I am in the trenches. As you mentioned, I have four children.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: I have a good wife, Anna. I was just recently asked to sort of be the unpaid pastor of my church for the next five or six years, right? That's a lot.

Michael: A lot.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: And it tests your essentialist muscles.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: You have to figure out how you can try to make the highest contribution without becoming a hypocrite to the principle involved.

Michael: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Uh-huh.

Greg: What I believe is that as you grapple with it every single day, you can do a lot better than you would with a reactive approach.

Michael: That's encouraging.

Greg: It is encouraging (to me it is), and I think it's possible. There are all sorts of safeguards, boundaries, you can put into your life. I have a boundary that at certain set times on Sunday, I will be with my family no matter what anyone else's needs and issues are.

Michele: Yes.

Greg: A lot of work goes into supporting the different people who are asking for time, but there's a set time that we're there. Monday nights are exclusively family time. I have date night every Friday night and Saturday night. There are things you can do, permanent boundaries you can put into your essential routine, that I think help to make this as effortless as possible.

Michele: They help. Yes.

Greg: Yeah. Terrific.

Michele: But it's still hard. It's still a pursuit, but you can help do that.

Greg: Yeah.

Michele: Perhaps what I love most about having this time with you today, Greg, is that Michael and I have read so many books. We've interviewed so many different authors and talked about different resources that are out there, but this really is not just a book for you. It's a life work, and I think that's what inspires me more than anything.

Michael: Me too.

Michele: It's not just a book that you're selling. It's just not. This is really, truly the message you have been called to deliver, and you're doing everything you can to get it out there because you believe in it. That's really what resonates with me, and I'm so thankful that this was one of your essential things: to pursue this message and get it out there. So thank you for that.

Greg: Yeah, and if you don't mind... That's the very point. Essentialism isn't one more thing to try to stuff into the already overstuffed posits of our lives. It is the very work of our lives. This is it. To answer the question, "What's important now?" every moment and to keep coming back to it... That is hard work.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Greg: That is seriously hard work, but that is the most important work of our whole lives. Back to this idea of having regrets on your deathbed... We will regret certain things, but if we decide today to become essentialists, that will not be one of the things we regret at that moment in our lives.

Michael: Exactly right.

Greg: So the question is this. On that day, on the very final day of our lives, what will we hope we decided to do on this one?

Michele: Powerful.

Michael: What a great way to end.

Michele: Well, if you enjoyed today's conversation, you can find a full transcript and show notes at michaelhyatt.com. In addition, if you'd like to watch the video rather than just listening, we will have the entire video available at michaelhyatt.com.

Could you do us a favor? I would love for you to head over to iTunes and rate the program. This is huge for us, and it's really the only way to get this content into the hands of as many people as possible. We'd really appreciate it. Michael, do you have any final thoughts today?

Michael: I have one thought, one call to action, and that is to go buy the book *Essentialism* by Greg McKeown. I recently wrote a post on my 10 favorite books of all time.

Michele: Mm-hmm.

Michael: This one made the list, and it's because it has had such a radical impact on me. I've made some very tough decisions this past year, as you know, to disentangle myself from a lot of things that are good things, that are worthwhile things but things that I no longer regard as essential.

Michele: Greg, thank you for being with us today. You have truly honored us by taking time to be here, and we are changed because of it. Thank you.

Greg: Michele, thank you. Michael, thank you.

Michael: Thanks, Greg.

Michele: To the rest of you who are listening and watching, thank you for being with us today.

Until next time, remember: Your life is a gift. Do what matters.