



12 Myths that Lead to a Busy, Unfulfilling Life

Greg McKeown

15 years ago, I quit law school to pursue one overarching question: “Why do capable people fail to break through to the next level?” The answer to the question, to my great surprise, is success.

I first noticed the phenomenon while working with executive teams in some of Silicon Valley’s most innovative companies. When they were focused on the right few things, it led to success. But the success bred options and opportunities which undermined the very focus that led to success in the first place. In other words, I found that success *can be a catalyst for failure*. If we are not careful, it leads to what Jim Collins described as “the undisciplined pursuit of more.” It is true for companies; it is true for people.

I recently met with a capable and driven executive and asked him, “How are you?” He gave me a rapid-fire answer of all of the things he was doing: travelling, business updates, career changes and his children’s innumerable activities. It sounded like an intense but satisfying life.

Then I asked him again, “How are you *really*?” And the moment I did, he became emotional, and the reality of his life flooded out of him: his stress, his frustration of trying to juggle it all, his sense that he had no time to really think, or play with his children, or enjoy any of it.

The (cute) summary is this: his schedule was always filled but his life wasn’t fulfilled. What’s less cute is that, for most of us, living in this way is one of the surest paths to a life of regrets.

An Australian nurse, Bronnie Ware, has written about the regrets of the dying, drawn from conversations with people in palliative care. At the top of that list is “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.” Second on the list was “I wish I didn’t work so hard.”

What fascinates me about this list is that no one tells themselves, “My goal is to live a life that others expect of me that isn’t true to myself.” The question that should grab us by the lapels, is, “Why do otherwise intelligent, driven, successful, capable people end up where they didn’t intend to be?”

What about you? Have you ever felt motion sickness rather than momentum? Have you ever sensed there was a more meaningful life available to you, but your to-do list was keeping you from it? Do you ever feel tricked by the trivial?

Why do otherwise capable, driven people get tricked by the trivial?

One explanation is that, if we're not careful, our lives often become dictated by ideas which sound convincing at some level but are really myths. We buy into them not realizing how taxing they really are, and once we absorb them, they take over our lives and quietly rob us of the meaning we truly desire. I've compiled some of these ideas into a list that I call the Manifesto for a Stressful, Unsatisfying Life. There are 12 myths (and 12 truths you can use to combat them).

“If we are not careful, success leads to what Jim Collins described as “the undisciplined pursuit of more.” It is true for companies; it is true for people.

Myth #1 | “I’m Too Busy Living to Think About Life.”

A friend of mine once said in passing, “Oh, I am too busy living to think about life.” These days you need to be always on, always plugged in, and always on the go. If you want to be stressed and unfulfilled, make sure you have no time to think, read deeply, reflect, or get perspective.

THE TRUTH: In order to *have* focus we need space *to* focus.

Myth #2 | “If You Can Fit It In You Should Fit It In.”

Do you want more pay or more time with your family? For a stressed and unsatisfied person, the correct answer is “Yes.” Do you want to do to the event at work or go watch a movie with your family? “Yes.” When faced with a tradeoff, go for a bit of both. Assume you can have the best of both worlds.

**THE TRUTH: We can try to avoid tradeoffs, but we can’t escape them.
We have to make a choice.**

Myth #3 | “If everyone is doing it then I need to do it.”

Do everything that’s popular—now. Let the fear of missing out consume you. Buy into the cultural bubble that glorifies being busy and checking social media and email constantly. Don’t pay attention to the quiet voice telling you a different life is possible. Just go with the crowd.

THE TRUTH: There is a joy in missing out. Discover it.

Myth #4 | “Everything is important.”

One sign you are going down the wrong road is if everything feels important. If this is true for you, your only option will be to emphasize everything. Don’t make the hard choices just call them all priorities and work flat out to do them all.

THE TRUTH: You can’t emphasize everything—it’s arithmetic.

Myth #5 | “Being a team player means always saying yes with a smile.”

Be helpful to everyone, all of the time. Don't worry about whether you can actually execute the tasks you're taking on—be a good team player. It's the kind of corporate citizenship you should embrace fully without thinking about it.

THE TRUTH: Saying yes to everything is a form of madness.

Myth #6 | “It's not enough to help people, I need to save them.”

You need to get good at making other people's problems your problems. It's not enough to listen to a challenge someone is facing; you need to take it upon yourself to solve it. It's not enough to support someone—you need to save them. Don't worry about boundaries. Make it personal. Own it fully.

THE TRUTH: You needn't, and shouldn't, rob people of their problems.

Myth #7 | “If I have said I would do it then I have to do it.”

As Edgar A. Guest writes in his famous poem, ‘It’s when things seem worst that you must not quit.’ And if it’s in a poem, it must be true.” If you have said you will do it, then you have to do it. If you have started then you have to finish. You are committed, and you cannot walk away. After all, nobody likes a quitter.

THE TRUTH: If you shouldn’t be doing what you’re doing then doing it isn’t the thing to do.

Myth #8 | “I’ll stay up late and get it done.”

If you ever mention sleep to someone remember to talk about how little you’ve had lately. Boast about getting five hours last night, or about how you pulled an all nighter earlier this week. It’s okay to be tired and to admit it. But don’t show weakness—or worse, laziness—by suggesting you need a full eight hours.

THE TRUTH: Sleep is for high performers.

Myth #9 | “When things don’t fit, force them.”

When people say, “I don’t think we can fit that in,” take it as a personal challenge to prove it can be done. Don’t worry about the stress you cause yourself or others. In fact, get so used to the pressure that you don’t notice it anymore. Ignore the strain in your neck and shoulders. Keep telling yourself you aren’t stressed.

THE TRUTH: You should never force anything.

Myth #10 | “I have to do this.”

It’s okay to admit that, theoretically speaking, you have a choice. Just act in practice as if you didn’t. This will allow you to say, “I have to” a lot, which is a handy phrase when dealing with conflict. If something you’re doing inconveniences a customer or a friend, it’s okay because it “has to” be done. It’s not that you want to create a hassle but that there is no other choice. Eventually you can think this so often, you will believe, deep in your heart, that you truly have no choice. Bravo!

THE TRUTH: The ability to choose cannot be taken away or given away—it can only be forgotten.

Myth #11 | “More is better than less.”

Remember that the key is to having more of a thing than someone else, whether it's money, prestige, or personal satisfaction. Facebook is a good place to start. The goal is to have more friends than anyone else. Choose shallow interactions over real relationships.

THE TRUTH: Choosing quality over quantity makes us more truly fulfilled—always.

Myth #12 | “I have plenty of time left to get to that.”

Of course you aren't doing exactly what you feel like should be doing, but there will be time to do what you want to do after you're finished doing what you have to do. You'll get to it later. It's a long life.

THE TRUTH: Life is pathetically short.

A Life that Really Matters

There is a story in the Hebrew Bible about Nehemiah, who is tasked with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, which had been torn down by invaders. Nehemiah sets off with his men and begins the work, but his enemies are plotting to distract him from his essential purpose. Among other efforts, they wrote to him no fewer than four times trying to persuade him to stop and at least talk to them about the project. Every time he responded with the same message, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.” He was so clear about what he wanted to say yes to that he had the confidence to say no to other distractions. The result? Nehemiah and his men rebuilt the walls in just 52 days.

We are unlikely to find ourselves rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but there are two essential lessons we can apply from this story.

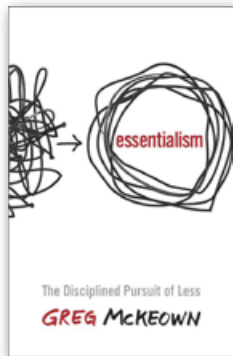
“If we’re not careful, our lives often become dictated by ideas which sound convincing at some level but are really myths. We buy into them ... and once we absorb them, they take over our lives and quietly rob us of the meaning we truly desire.”

The first lesson is that our thinking about priorities is all wrong. The word “priority” came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular, meaning the prior or very first thing, and the word stayed singular for the next 500 years. Then in the 1900s we pluralized the term and started speaking of “priorities.” Instead, we need to take a page from Nehemiah’s book. Ask yourself, “If I could only do one thing, what would it be?”

Second, the word “decide” comes from the Latin “cid” or “cis,” the root for words like “scissors”, “fracticide” and “homicide.” Originally the word meant “to cut” or “to kill.” So make a habit of asking yourself this question: In the last week or so, have I said no to a good opportunity to make way for a great one?

When organizing your life, there are only two options: The disciplined pursuit of the essential or the undisciplined pursuit of the nonessential. And that matters because **if you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Greg McKeown writes and speaks around the world on the importance of living and leading as an Essentialist. He writes a regular blog for *Harvard Business Review* as well as for LinkedIn's Influencer group. He has run workshops, consulted, and spoken at companies such as Apple, Google, Facebook, IDEO, Microsoft, Twitter, Salesforce.com, Symantec, Dropbox, VMware, the California Maritime Academy, and several major nonprofits. He teaches a session of the d.Leadership class at Stanford University and serves as a Young Global Leader for the World Economic Forum. Greg holds an MBA from Stanford University.

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