

RELATIONSHIP 1 | STUFF

I first met Jason and Jennifer Kirkendoll in the post-show hug line at one of The Minimalists' live events. They told me that when they married, at age twenty-four, they were both filled with hope for their future. Before they knew it, they were living the American Dream: four kids, two dogs, a cat, and a home just outside Minneapolis. Jason worked for a large insurance company; Jennifer was a stay-at-home mom.

In time, however, their dream slowly devolved into a nightmare.

The house that was once their dream home no longer fit their ever-expanding lifestyle. So they found a bigger home in a distant suburb, taking on the burden of a larger thirty-year mortgage and a longer commute.

The expansion didn't stop with their home. To keep up appearances, they bought new cars every few years and outfitted their walk-in closets with designer clothes. To alleviate their anxiety, they shopped at the Mall of America on the weekends. They ate too much junk food, watched too much junk TV, and distracted themselves with too much junk on the Internet, exchanging a meaningful life for ephemera.

And yet *too much* wasn't enough.

Before they were thirty-five, Jason and Jennifer were drowning in problems. Most serious were their money troubles. Even with overtime pay, Jason's fifty-hour workweeks no longer kept them afloat, so Jennifer sought a part-time job to help keep the bill collectors at bay: credit cards, car payments, college loans, private-school tuition, house payments.

But the money problems were only the top layer covering a labyrinth of deeper issues.

Their sex life was nonexistent.

Their careers were unfulfilling.

They hid purchases from one another.

They lied to each other about their spending.

They ignored their creative desires.

They took each other for granted.

They grew petty and resentful.

They were ashamed of who they'd become.

A decade after their nuptials, they were anxious, overwhelmed, and stressed because they'd lost sight of their ideal vision. They'd squandered their most precious resources—time, energy, and attention—on fruitless miscellanea. The exuberant, hopeful twenty-four-year-olds who'd exchanged vows were so far in the rearview they were completely out of view.

Well.

The only way to mask their discontent was to hop back on the hedonic treadmill—spending money they didn't have to buy things they didn't need to impress people they didn't like. They worshipped at the altar of consumerism, and stuff had become their new God.

Then, on Christmas morning, in 2016, they discovered a fresh perspective. With the carpet under their Christmas tree bare from the morning's unwrapping, Jennifer switched on Netflix, like she had hundreds of times before, and stumbled across a movie called *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*. Throughout the Matt D'Avella–directed film about Ryan's and my journey,² she found herself contrasting the simple lives on the screen with the heaps of wrapping paper, empty boxes, and untouched gifts strewn across her living room floor. Not even four hours had gone by, and her kids were already bored by half their new toys. And the obligatory gift Jason had purchased for her—with *their* credit card—was back in its box, already tucked away in their closet, uninteresting and unused, like most of the things they owned.

Jennifer thought back to her college days.

Her life was so simple then.

When did everything get so complex?

The Latin root of the word “complex” is *complect*, which means “to interweave two or more things together.” Jason and Jennifer had interwoven so many unnecessary possessions, distractions, and obligations into their daily lives that they were no longer able to distinguish the junk from the essentials.

The opposite of complexity is simplicity. The word “simple” shares a Latin root with the word *simplex*, which means “having only one part.” So when we talk about simplifying, what we're really talking about is un-complecting our lives—removing that which is no longer serving the complex structures we've created—because anything that's too complex gets tangled.

² If you aren't already a Matt D'Avella fan, do yourself a favor and subscribe to his YouTube channel, [YouTube.com/mattdavella](https://www.youtube.com/mattdavella). He'll quickly become your favorite minimalist filmmaker.

Jennifer knew that if they were going to be happy again—if their family was going to reconnect with what was important—a change was critical. They needed to simplify. But she was unsure where to start, so she turned to the online world.

The Internet exposed Jennifer to a plethora of people who had simplified their lives with minimalism. Colin Wright, a twenty-something entrepreneur from Missouri, left behind his 100-hour workweeks to travel the globe with only fifty-two items in his backpack. Courtney Carver, a wife and mother to a teenage daughter in Salt Lake City, jettisoned 80 percent of her material possessions

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and was able to fully focus on treating her multiple sclerosis. Joshua and Kim Becker, parents in the suburbs of Phoenix, let go of most of their excess and founded a nonprofit that builds orphanages on the U.S.-Mexico border. Leo Babauta, a husband and father of six in Guam, quit smoking, lost eighty pounds, moved his family to California, and finally pursued his dream of being a full-time writer.

Jennifer found dozens of inspiring stories like these scattered across the web. Although each of these people led considerably different lives—married parents, childless singles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor—she noticed they all shared at least two things in common. First, they were living deliberate, meaningful lives—they were passionate and purpose-driven, and they seemed much richer than any of the so-called rich people she'd encountered. Second, they all attributed their meaningful lives to this thing called *minimalism*.

And then, of course, there was *The Minimalists'* story, which Jennifer had seen in our documentary. At the time, Ryan and I

were two seemingly normal thirty-five-year-olds (like Jason and Jennifer) from the Midwest (ditto) who had achieved the American Dream (double ditto) and then walked away from our overindulgent lifestyles to pursue a more meaningful life.

After falling down the rabbit hole, Jennifer was excited to clear the clutter. Jason, on the other hand, was skeptical, but the evidence was overwhelming, and deep down he knew they had to do something to get back on track.

Fueled by the excitement—and fear—of letting go, they rented a dumpster and placed it next to their overstuffed house. During the New Year's weekend, they began chucking everything they hadn't used in the last year: clothes, cosmetics, toys, books, DVDs, CDs, electronics, utensils, plates, cups, mugs, pet accessories, tools, furniture, exercise equipment—even a Ping-Pong table. Anything that wasn't bolted down was subject to dismissal.

They let go aggressively.

Within a week, their house felt different.

The physical mess was dissipating.

The visual clutter was reduced.

The echo in their home was new.

Was that the sound of simplicity?

As January 2017 came to a close, Jason and Jennifer were nearly finished excising their home of its excess. Within a week, the dumpster would be gone, and years of unintentional hoarding would be removed from their lives forever.

They were making significant progress. Their closets and basement and garage were organized. Their remaining furniture had

a function. Their things were in order. They could breathe better. They laughed more. They were more agreeable. They worked together as a family. Everything they owned served a purpose, and everything else was out of the way. Their house was a home again. A rush of calm overtook them as they recognized their priorities were finally at the forefront of their lives.

Then—the unexpected.

The day before its scheduled retrieval, their dumpster caught fire. No one knows exactly how it happened, but while Jason and Jennifer were at work that Tuesday, something ignited the contents of the now-overflowing dumpster, and by the time they returned from work, their house had burned to the ground, including everything they wanted to keep.

Fortunately, their kids had been at school during the conflagration, and all three pets had escaped through the doggie door at the back of the house. But everything else was gone. Everything. Every. Thing.

With tears in their eyes, Jason and Jennifer held their children and stared blankly at the smoldering rubble. How could this happen? After years of hard work, achieving, and accumulation, they had nothing to show for it. Nothing. No. Thing.

It was terrifying.

It was depressing.

It was . . .

Freeing?

The past month had been an exercise in letting go, and at this moment they realized they were capable of letting go of anything. Any. Thing.

Their kids were safe. Their family was intact. And their rela-

tionship was considerably better than it was a month ago. Their future was whatever they wanted to make it. For the first time in their adult lives, they weren't tethered to the lifestyle and possessions and expectations that had constrained them until now. They had un-*completed* their weave. As their complexities went up in smoke—literally—they were thrust into the simple life by way of a dumpster fire.

A month before, Jason and Jennifer would have been devastated by this setback. But with their new perspective, they didn't see it as a setback—it was an inconvenient push forward. Now, with everything out of the way, their only question was “What are we going to do with our newfound freedom?”

Freedom from Impulse

It's shocking how many people have the same story as Jason and Jennifer—minus the dumpster fire, obviously. Most Westerners have chased happiness through impulse purchases, ephemeral pleasures, and the trophies of ostensible success. Really, all of our detrimental decisions—and, ironically, our discontent—can be traced back to our desire to be happy. That's because we often conflate happiness with instant gratification.

“Happiness” is such a slippery term. Different people mean different things when they use the word. Some people mean pleasure. Others mean fulfillment. Some mean contentment. Others, satisfaction. A few erudite thinkers mean well-being.

I would posit, however, that people aren't searching for happiness—they're searching for *freedom*. And true happiness—that is, enduring well-being—is a by-product of that freedom.

Freedom. The word itself conjures myriad images: a flag popping crisply in the wind, a war hero returning home, an eagle

soaring high above a canyon. But real freedom moves beyond the imagery and involves something more abstract.

When you think about freedom, you often think of doing whatever you want, whenever you want.

Whatever.

Whenever.

Dig deeper, however, and you quickly realize that's not freedom—it's self-inflicted tyranny.

Left to her own devices, my six-year-old daughter, Ella, will happily do “whatever she wants”: throw her toys across the room, binge-watch YouTube videos, gorge on chocolate cake, refuse to brush her teeth, play in traffic.

These decisions feel good in the moment, but as our poor decisions compound, we reap the rotting fruits of our indiscretions. In time, thoughtless decisions lead to thoughtless habits that damage our relationships, until, eventually, we've distanced ourselves from the very thing we sought—freedom.

We occasionally deploy euphemisms to describe our lack of freedom.

Tethered.

Chained.

Anchored.

Trapped.

Stuck.

What we mean, though, is that we've lost control, and we no longer possess the discipline necessary to walk away from that which holds us back: we're tethered to the past, chained to a career,

anchored by a relationship, trapped by debt, stuck in this two-bit town.

Worse, some possessions and achievements actually ape the form of freedom—the glimmering sports cars, the mammoth suburban houses, the corner-office promotions—although they often accomplish the obverse of freedom: faux freedom. The average American stands on their manicured lawn, imprisoned by the picket fence of their American Dream.

This is, of course, a little dramatic, but it illustrates an important point. Real freedom stands beyond the accoutrements and decor of faux freedom. And to get there we must travel outside the deceptively beautiful fences we've constructed.

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You see, real freedom involves much more than material possessions and wealth and traditional success. Real freedom can't be tracked on a spreadsheet—it is an abstraction. But unlike distance and time, we don't have units of measurement for freedom. That's why it's so difficult to grasp. So we settle instead for what can be counted: dollars, trinkets, and social-media clout, all of which lack the meaning and rigor and payoff of real freedom.

And the more we pursue faux freedom, the further we travel from actual freedom. And when this happens, we feel threatened by the freedom of others. So we protect our hoard, we question anyone who approaches life differently, and we cling tightly to the status quo because we're scared that someone else's nontraditional lifestyle is an affront to our own. If that person is free, then we are not.

But we forget that freedom is not a zero-sum game. The rising

tide of freedom—real freedom—lifts all boats, large or small, while faux freedom only beaches them.

Sure, faux freedom is comfortable, not unlike a child's security blanket, but it is not the blanket that keeps a child secure. Security resides in our ability to move on, to walk away from what's holding us back, and to walk toward that which is worthwhile.

Minimalist Rules for Living with Less

Rules can be arbitrary, restrictive, stodgy—and they often get in the way of meaningful change. Sometimes, however, a few loosely held rules can keep us on track, but only if we possess a deep understanding of the problems we want to address.

Whenever we attempt to simplify, we often get stuck before we even get started. When faced with a hoard of possessions—some useful, others not—it is difficult to determine what adds value and what doesn't, which makes letting go extremely difficult.

I wish I could hand you a list of the 100 items you're supposed to own. But minimalism doesn't work like that. What brings value to my life could very well clutter yours. Further, the things that once added value may not continue to add value, so we must constantly question not only the things we acquire, but the things we hold on to.

Because minimalism is not an antidote to desire, and because, like most people, Ryan and I still act on impulse, we've created a collection of Minimalist Rules for Living with Less, which we use to resist the tug of consumerism and get organized. You'll find these rules—the Just in Case Rule, the Seasonality Rule, and more than a dozen others—sprinkled throughout the pages of this book (just look for the gray boxes like the one on the next page).

It's worth noting that these "rules" aren't really rules in the tra-

ditional sense. Meaning, they are not prescriptive or dogmatic. Nor are they one-size-fits-all—because what works for Ryan or me may not work for you. These are our recipe for simple living, and like any recipe, you may need to adjust for taste. If the 30/30 Rule is too strict, or the 20/20 Rule is too inflexible, or the 90/90 Rule is too restrictive, then consider setting your own parameters based on your desired outcome and current comfort level.

It's crucial to get a little uncomfortable, though, because a bit of discomfort is required to build your letting-go muscles. As time goes by and your muscles grow, you can continue to adjust the rules to challenge you. Before you know it, you might be more of a minimalist than *The Minimalists*. We've seen it happen dozens of times.

MINIMALIST RULE FOR LIVING WITH LESS

No Junk Rule

Everything you own can be placed in three piles: *essential*, *nonessential*, *junk*. Since most of our *needs* are universal, only a few things belong in the *essential* pile: food, shelter, clothing, transportation, vocation, education. In an ideal world, the majority of your stuff would fit in the *nonessential* pile; strictly speaking, you don't need a couch or a dining table, but they're worth owning if they enhance your life. But sadly, almost all of the things you own fit in the *junk* pile, the artifacts you *like*—or, more accurately, *think* you like. While this junk often masquerades as indispensable, it actually gets in the way. The key is to get rid of the junk to make room for everything else.