

## 5 Hacking Stuff

Hackers seek shortcuts, sometimes toward unusual ends. Tynan, for example, has taken a different route than most: college dropout, professional gambler, pickup artist, software developer, author. He learned to type on the Dvorak keyboard and twice attempted polyphasic sleep. Despite living frugally, he throws away nickels and pennies. The few dollars he loses a year aren't worth the hassle.

Tynan also likes to travel, and for many years his home had wheels. Two of his books describe the philosophy and practice of his lifestyle, *Life Nomadic* and *The Tiniest Mansion: How to Live in Luxury on the Side of the Road*. In the first book, Tynan discusses the philosophy of living in a recreational vehicle: "Minimalism is essentially freedom from excess, and there are few lifestyles more minimalist than living in less than one hundred square feet of space in a vehicle. The mental clutter associated with rent payment, home maintenance, cleaning, vacuuming, and furnishing is gone."<sup>1</sup> In *The Tiniest Mansion*, Tynan addresses the practicalities of living in an RV, such as getting utilities and disposing of waste. And he's frequently asked if this lifestyle interferes with dating: "My one suggestion is to tell a story early on that indicates that you aren't forced to live in an RV as a last resort, but that you intentionally chose a freedom-laden minimalist lifestyle."<sup>2</sup>

Telling others, and ourselves, a compelling story about our life gives it meaning. This is true for life hackers and their relationship to possessions. When David Allen spoke of getting a handle on "stuff" in *Getting Things Done*, he was speaking of incomplete tasks that occupy the mind. Material stuff also occupies the mind. It takes work to get and keep possessions, no matter how productive or organized you are. Consequently, some life hackers embrace minimalism by limiting their possessions to the essential. And

technology frees them to become digital nomads, taking their work, social networks, and entertainment with them wherever they go.

When life hackers discuss their relationship to stuff, they tell two stories. They talk about the gear that is essential and how they discarded everything else. In these stories *zen* often makes an appearance. This invocation connotes simplicity and a clean aesthetic, made famous by Steve Jobs at Apple. As a young man, Jobs studied Buddhism intensively. Even though he was not known for his compassion and seemed far from ego-less, Zen suited his aesthetic. (There is a famous picture of young Jobs sitting, cross-legged, on the floor under a Tiffany lamp, the only piece of furniture worthy of his otherwise empty mansion.) Not surprisingly, most life hackers favor Apple's aesthetic and products. The blogs *43 Folders*, *Zen Habits*, and *Minimal Mac* have dozens of posts about Macs. Tynan is the notable exception to the fan-boy rule—even so, his 2012 his laptop of choice was the Asus *Zenbook Prime*.

Even if the references to Zen are shallow, they show that life hacking transcends simple tips and tricks. The hacker ethos informs how hackers understand and approach larger issues, like material contentment, and hackers are happy to share their recommendations and philosophy with others. We can learn much about contemporary life via their stories and the questions they prompt. For example, what does it mean to choose “a freedom-laden minimalist lifestyle” in a society of unequal wealth, in which others have few choices? To address this question, we need to first understand a bit of life hacking's cultural history.

### **Gear Lists and the *Whole Earth Catalog***

One tenet of minimalism is that if you rely on a few things, they should be dependable. As Tynan writes in *Life Nomadic*, the “best way to enjoy what this amazing world has to offer is through limited but high-quality consumption.”<sup>3</sup> A recurring story life hackers tell about their relationship to stuff is their search for good gear. *Lifehacker*, for example, showcases bags and workspaces filled with useful items. Individuals also post gear lists. Tynan has been doing so since 2008—frequently extolling the virtues of wool clothing.

A good online gear list has a common structure. Each item is accompanied by an image and personal reflection. Some lists are capped by images of all the items arranged next to each other and another of everything packed

away. Links to Amazon allow authors to make commissions on their recommendations. Tynan's lists are excellent: "every product I recommend is the absolute best in its class; if it wasn't, I wouldn't be using it."<sup>4</sup>

Although gear lists have reached their apex online, there are historical antecedents. In *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau listed the supplies and foodstuffs he used during his experiment of simple living—making him a favorite of life hackers.<sup>5</sup> Among the items he purchased and scavenged, Thoreau paid \$8.03 (and one-half cent) for the boards he used for his cabin, which were repurposed from the shanty of an itinerant railroad worker. Tynan makes no mention of *Walden*, but his account parallels that of Thoreau. Tynan spent around \$20,000 for a 1995 Rialta RV, which he fitted with granite countertops cut from a single \$200 slab. In their retrofits, neither Thoreau nor Tynan cared about luxury per se. They sought value, which was best had via used items and elbow grease.

A more recent gear list precursor is the *Whole Earth Catalog*, first published in 1968. The *Catalog* recommended tools and books for those seeking self-sufficiency and a bigger picture. Its publisher, Stewart Brand, trained as a biologist at Stanford University and served in the US Army, but his most notable characteristic is his take on the world. In the few years preceding the catalog, Brand campaigned for NASA to release a photo of Earth from space, which would show humanity's interdependence. When they did so, he used the image as the catalog's cover art and talisman.

Beyond perusing online copies of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the best way to appreciate Brand's interests is through Fred Turner's history, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*.<sup>6</sup> Turner discusses the influences of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, Buckminster Fuller's "comprehensive designer," Marshall McLuhan's "global village," the USCO art collective, and the road- and acid-tripping Merry Pranksters. Brand fashioned his eclectic interests into a syncretic vision for human improvement, and he created spaces in which his vision could become a reality.

Despite being in the thick of the counterculture, Brand maintained a clean-cut look and deeply appreciated what he learned as an infantry officer. He had learned that with both soldiers and hippies, you have to make the best of what you have. His organizing abilities allowed him to play the part of countercultural entrepreneur by identifying nascent trends and giving them space and cohesion, as he did as a coorganizer of the 1966 Trips

Festival in San Francisco. This three-day show was the first mass event of the hippie movement and featured the Grateful Dead, LSD-spiked punch, and a psychedelic light show. Thousands attended.

The *Whole Earth Catalog* served as another space, in print, for those seeking an alternative way of living—long before anyone spoke of lifestyle design. The *Catalog's* subtitle was *Access to Tools*, and its criteria were pragmatic. Items should be useful, further self-sufficiency, provide good value, and be little known but easily purchased by mail. Its stated purpose was grandiose: “We are as gods and might as well get used to it.” Power was shifting away from the formal institutions of schools, churches, corporations, and governments. The individual could now “conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”<sup>7</sup> This individual sounds a lot like a life hacker.

Despite its name, the *Whole Earth Catalog* was not just a listing of gear. More often than not, items in the *Catalog* were ideas, and the idea that Brand was most taken with fifty years ago was that of systems. Each issue of the *Catalog*, published regularly between 1968 and 1972, had a section dedicated to “understanding whole systems”—the same motive that drives hackers today. Other sections of the *Catalog* could serve as categories at *Life-hacker*: Shelter and Land Use, Industry and Craft, Communications, Community, Nomadics, and Learning.

Life hackers share Brand's belief that ideas are powerful tools. This is best seen in Tim Ferriss's *Tools of Titans: The Tactics, Routines, and Habits of Billionaires, Icons, and World Class Performers*. Ferriss writes that “world-class performers don't have superpowers”; instead, “the rules they've crafted for themselves allow the bending of reality to such an extent that it may seem that way.” His self-help promise is that his Titans “learned how to do this, and so can you.”<sup>8</sup> If Brand's readers were gods, when given access to the right tools, Ferriss's readers could appear like Titans, pre-Olympian deities, when given the same. Although both men love gadgets, their most powerful tools are ideas, especially those about systems and the rules for taking advantage of them.

### The “Californian Ideology” and *Cool Tools*

Stewart Brand was quick to recognize that “computers and their programs are tools,” as he wrote in the first *Whole Earth Software Catalog* (1984).<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, PCs could be networked, and in 1985 Brand cofounded The

WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a San Francisco–area bulletin board system. Again, he played the part of countercultural entrepreneur. The WELL was the online home for many of those later known as the *digerati*, the authors and entrepreneurs who championed the online revolution. Yet despite talk of a revolution, Brand saw cyberspace as a continuation of 1960s counterculture. In a 1995 essay for *Time*, “We Owe It All to the Hippies,” he claimed that the hippies had provided “the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless internet but also the entire personal-computer revolution.”<sup>10</sup> Not all hippies were as keen on computers as Brand, but he saw their antiauthoritarianism and appreciation of interdependent systems as fundamental to what followed.

Nine years later, in 2004, two European scholars lamented these same philosophical foundations. In a much-discussed essay, UK media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron warned that “a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age.” They identified this “Californian Ideology” of the *digerati* as “an anti-statist gospel of cybernetic libertarianism: a bizarre mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism beefed up with lots of technological determinism.”<sup>11</sup> Theirs was an astute ideological vivisection, even if their call for a European alternative was feeble.

Whereas Stewart Brand bridged the counterculture of the 1960s with the cyberculture of the 1980s and 1990s, Kevin Kelly carried the torch of the Californian Ideology into the new millennium. Kelly was an editor of a number of *Whole Earth* publications in their later years and, with Brand, helped organize the first Hackers Conference in 1984 and launch The WELL the following year. In the 1990s, Kelly became best known as the executive editor of *Wired* and for his books about complex systems and the rules of the new economy. Tools, systems, and rules are his motifs.

One of the curious things about Kelly is that his reputation as a tech enthusiast is contrary to his old-timey facial hair: a beard without a mustache. This and his interest in the Amish seem at odds with someone who believes that human culture and machine intelligence are becoming a beneficent superorganism that he calls the “technium.” But Kelly believes the Amish have an undeserved reputation as Luddites. Although they abstain from many modern devices, they are “ingenious hackers and tinkers, the ultimate makers and do-it-yourselfers and surprisingly pro technology.”<sup>12</sup>

The Amish think carefully about their relationship to technology; they are minimalists with tried-and-true tools.

In 2000, Kelly returned to the *Catalog's* mission by way of *Cool Tools*, a new way of sharing recommendations. He began with an email list for tools that “really work” and moved to a blog in 2003. A decade later he expanded *Cool Tools* to include a print book and podcast. *Cool Tools* solicits reviews of tools of any type, be it a literal tool, kitchen gadget, or useful book. Tools can be “old or new as long as they are wonderful.” The site’s philosophy is to “post things we like and ignore the rest”; it asks its readers to simply “tell us what you love.”<sup>13</sup> Kelly has been joined at *Cool Tools* by Mark Frauenfelder, a colleague from *Wired*, cofounder of *Boing Boing* (“a directory of wonderful things”), and founding editor-in-chief of *Make*. (Recall that life hacking’s founders, Danny O’Brien and Merlin Mann, had a column in *Make* in 2005 and 2006.)

Kelly and Frauenfelder’s interest in wonderful things and cool tools is complemented by another manifestation of the Californian Ideology. In *maker culture*, artists, hackers, and crafters share their creations of utility and delight. This happens online, in print, or at a Maker Faire, a gathering of artists, builders, citizen scientists, hackers, and performers. Makers use their cool tools to create wonderful things.

Kelly considers all of this, especially life hacking, part of a legacy: “The *Whole Earth Catalogs* preached the hacker/designer approach to life starting in 1968, decades before this lifehacking became the norm. The Catalogs were a paper-based database offering thousands of hacks, tips, tools, suggestions, and possibilities for optimizing your life.” More recently, Kelly cofounded the Quantified Self (QS), a topic of the next chapter. He remains resolutely optimistic about technology and systems. Kelly’s long-standing pinned tweet is “Over the long term, the future is decided by optimists.”<sup>14</sup>

Kelly’s optimism is one of the many connections between the counter-culture of the 1960s, the cyberculture of the 1980s and 1990s, and the life hackers of today. The recurrent theme throughout is that the world is constituted by systems, and tools are the means by which you operate within and upon those systems. In this vision, enthusiasts decide the future, when empowered with the right tools and free from institutional interference. As we saw in chapter 1, life hacking is a continuation of American self-help and extols the values of individualism, pragmatism, perseverance, and entrepreneurialism. Now we can see that life hacking is also a manifestation of the Californian Ideology, with a side of systematizing.

Even so, many life hackers are unfamiliar with this historical legacy. Although Ferriss read the *Catalog* as a kid, traveled with *Walden*, and has Kelly as a frequent guest on his podcast, there is scant evidence of this kind of recognition among others, especially ordinary fans of life hacking. But you need not understand all the past turns of a path in order to begin walking it. And hacking is as much a sensibility as it is a culture. Life hackers are attracted to a path of technology and making, of optimizing and optimism.

### **“Masculine, Entrepreneurial, Well-Educated, and White”**

In his history of the *Catalog*, Turner notes that its audience was “masculine, entrepreneurial, well-educated, and white.” While the *Catalog* celebrated self-sufficiency and community, “it avoided questions of gender, race, and class toward a rhetoric of individual and small-group empowerment.”<sup>15</sup> Although Matt Thomas makes no mention of the *Catalog* in his critique, he sees life hacking in a similar light. Minimalism, specifically, is a “distinctly masculine consumer style” emerging from young white men’s socioeconomic anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

These broad characterizations are true enough, but the history of hacking does include those beyond this demographic, though they tend to be overlooked because prominent life hackers select heroes like themselves and portray them in the best possible light. At the same time, they are unaware of the stories of those who are different. Fortunately, this can be mitigated, partially, with three short asides.

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In an earlier chapter I noted how productivity hackers and Ben Franklin share an underappreciation of how productivity is dependent on the invisible work of others. In this chapter, we have encountered another life hacker hero: Henry David Thoreau. Again, the parallels are striking. Thoreau was a smart young man from a modest family wishing to experiment with simple living. He conducted his experiment on property owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a family friend, for two years, two months, and two days. (If he were alive today, he might have blogged about this as the “2-2-2 challenge.”) He wrote up his experiences, documenting his few supplies and expenses and his reflections of living in a cabin next to Walden Pond. As such, Thoreau has been claimed as the first declutterer and original minimalist.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Kathryn Schulz, writing in the *New Yorker*, asks: “Why, given his hypocrisy, sanctimony, and misanthropy, has Thoreau been so cherished?” Walden Pond was hardly remote: a railroad was being built nearby. In fact, Thoreau bought the windows and boards for his cabin from the family of an Irish-immigrant railroad worker, whose home Thoreau described as a “compost heap.” This family did not choose to live simply, they had to. Additionally, Schulz believes Thoreau cheated in the accounting of his minimalism. Concord was a twenty-minute walk away, and he visited it several times a week, “lured by his mother’s cookies or the chance to dine with friends.” His mother and sisters visited him weekly, usually bearing food. He glossed over these facts “despite detailing with otherwise skinflint precision his eating habits and expenditures.” Thoreau never married, and he lived the rest of his life in his parents’ boarding house. Schulz thinks *Walden* reads like a cross of *The 4-Hour Workweek* and a Calvinist sermon: “Thoreau denigrates labor, praises leisure, and claims that he can earn his living for the month in a matter of days, only to turn around and write that ‘from exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality.’”<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Schulz, others defend Thoreau.<sup>19</sup> He paid rent to his parents and helped support the family even if the women did his laundry, which was the typical division of labor at the time. He was opposed to war, as well as the oppression and enslavement of Native and African Americans. Thoreau’s experiment took determination, and he wrote about it with thoughtfulness and skill.

Even so, when we draw aggrandizing connections to heroes of the past, we should not forget their shortcomings or, at least, the biases of their time. We will soon see criticisms of privileged minimalists, to which Thoreau’s case also speaks. By focusing on those who choose to live simply, we can easily overlook the skills and stories of those who must do so.

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Even before the *Catalog*, there was another publication dedicated to hackers and makers: the *Toomey J Gazette*, started in the 1950s. In its pages, dozens of people with disabilities shared their DIY hacks for making products more accessible and useful. In the 1968 issue, the editor of the Homemaking section included hundreds of tips from a survey of “cooking quads” (quadriplegics), which could also be of value “to many who were less disabled.” Examples include handling a sink faucet with a spoon (see figure 5.1) or placing a



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- "I turn on the water by hitting the faucet handles."
- "I walk my fingers around the sink to the water faucets."
- "I tap faucets on and off with small hammer with long handle."
- "I use a long wooden spoon (A) with four nails in the bowl section. Wrap nails with electrician's friction tape."
- English booklets list both homemade and commercial models of tap turners:
  - (B) For a single bar tap, a groove whittled out of a cylindrical piece of wood.
  - (C) A tap turner made of a length of wood, a drilled hole, and two cup hooks.



Figure 5.1

Gini Laurie, "Homemaking Problems & Solutions," 1968, *Toomey J Gazette*. Used with permission from Post-Polio Health International.

damp dishcloth under a bowl to keep it in place while stirring.<sup>20</sup> Subsequent issues showed this community of hackers at the forefront of home automation and remote education and work. The community would be recognized more broadly in the 1980s, when poet and author Mark O'Brien joined as the disability editor for a couple of *Whole Earth* publications. Acknowledging this improves our understanding of history. It broadens the picture of what a hacker can look like. And such recognition can enhance the exchange and development of useful hacks across communities.

Beyond those who are overlooked because they are outside the mainstream, there is the matter of co-option. Frequently, a heralded innovation outshines precursors by virtue of a high-tech and masculine sheen. As one snarky columnist wrote of the 2017 boom in Bay Area coliving (i.e., having roommates in San Francisco): tech entrepreneurs often "find an existing service, privatize it, and claim to have 'reinvented it.'"<sup>21</sup> Similarly, an overheard comment, tweeted and then retweeted many times, is that "[San Francisco] tech culture is focused on solving one problem: What is my mother no longer doing for me?"<sup>22</sup> One of those things is feeding you. And when hackers came up with meal substitutes, they were lauded as innovative tech creators. But this spotlight gave others pause.

When San Francisco tech reporter Nellie Bowles attempted to explain Soylent to her mom, her mother responded, “Oh, you mean SlimFast?”

I balked. No, Soylent is definitely tech, I explained, and it’s on my beat. It has a minimalist label and comes in iterative versions like software (we’re at Soylent 2.0). It has a young white male founder who philosophizes about it and connects it to broader themes of life efficiency and has raised \$20m in venture capital funding on its promise of releasing us from the prison of food.<sup>23</sup>

However, after thinking about it, Bowles came to the conclusion that most Silicon Valley food innovation is “just rebranding what women have been doing for decades. There’s nothing inherently different about Soylent from SlimFast at all. And yet SlimFast is low-brow, funny and a little sad. Soylent is cool, cutting-edge, brutally efficient and, here’s the key word: innovative.” Soylent’s creator claims the company is not targeting medicinal use and SlimFast is not nutritionally complete. Rather, Soylent is an inexpensive, convenient, and fully nutritious breakfast or lunch replacement.<sup>24</sup> This might be true, but I know men who use Soylent, tweet and blog about it, though I’ve never seen any man do the same for SlimFast.

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Kevin Kelly is always in search of useful tools, and in 2008 he cofounded a movement for “tools that help us see and understand bodies and minds.”<sup>25</sup> The Quantified Self (QS) was created to allow creators and users of these tools to gain “self knowledge through numbers.” Five years later, Amelia Greenhall, a San Francisco designer, announced the first QSXX meetup. QSXX was created as “a space for all the interesting, women specific QS conversations we want to have.” Greenhall majored in electrical engineering as an undergrad and got involved in QS while a graduate student in public health. She described her first meeting to me as a “finding your people moment,” and within a year she began organizing meetups herself.<sup>26</sup>

Greenhall noticed that after her meetups, a woman would inevitably approach her wondering if there was room for women-specific health topics? This prompted Greenhall to investigate: “There are 500 Show & Tell talk videos online. I couldn’t find any on periods, yet women have probably been self-tracking this for, oh, somewhere around 100,000 years.”<sup>27</sup> And so in 2013, she organized QSXX San Francisco, which would be followed by groups in Boston and New York. Women practitioners and scholars are more visible in this space than in life hacking as a whole. This is in part because of their efforts to have their long-standing interests and history in self-tracking recognized.

Despite this visibility, women continue to be overlooked. After Apple's 2014 announcement of its Health app, Greenhall and others were interviewed about how women are excluded from self-tracking apps. Apple's app could be used to track electrodermal activity, calorie and calcium intake, heart and respiratory rate—but not menstruation. Greenhall explains that “VC [venture capital] money goes almost exclusively to white men, and white men always get the same advice: ‘The place to start looking for ideas is in the things you need.’”<sup>28</sup> The consequence of this is that the resulting products tend to be hobbled by stereotypes and naiveté. For example, Greenhall notes that not all women want to lose weight, some want to gain or maintain it, but many apps assume otherwise. Also, women are not as keen to share their location, weight, and sleep data with the world because of safety concerns. QSXX helps ensure a space remains among self-trackers for those who do not identify as male.

Others, in time, realize that the values that go along with the high-tech sheen are alienating, and they choose to step away. For example, in an essay in *The Atlantic*, an engineering professor wrote about why she no longer identifies as a maker: “The cultural primacy of *making*, especially in tech culture—that it is intrinsically superior to not-making, to repair, analysis, and especially caregiving—is informed by the gendered history of who made things, and in particular, who made things that were shared with the world, not merely for hearth and home.”<sup>29</sup> The consequence of this, sadly, is that the dominant demographic associated with the story of hacking becomes self-perpetuating.

### From Much to Minimal

Life hackers tell two stories about their relationship to possessions. If the first is about the gear and tools they find essential, the second is how they get rid of everything else. Joshua Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus are friends who became evangelists of this latter tale. By the age of thirty, despite their success, they were possessed by a “lingering discontent.”

We had achieved everything that was supposed to make us happy: great six-figure jobs, luxury cars, oversized houses, and all the stuff to clutter every corner of our consumer-driven lifestyles. And yet with all that stuff, we weren't satisfied with our lives. We weren't happy. There was a gaping void, and working 70–80 hours a week just to buy more stuff didn't fill the void: it only brought more debt, stress, anxiety, fear, loneliness, guilt, overwhelm, and depression. What's worse,

we didn't have control of our time, and thus didn't control our own lives. So, in 2010, we took back control using the principles of minimalism to focus on what's important.<sup>30</sup>

Their blog, *The Minimalists*, was sufficiently popular that in the following year, they quit their jobs and published *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life*, followed by an international book tour. They offered private mentoring and online writing classes to those who wished to follow their path. In 2012, they moved to a mountainside cabin in Montana—"the Thoreau thing with Wi-Fi."<sup>31</sup> For a time, they were a media sensation, telling their story to every outlet that authors aspire to reach. Every generation experiences insights anew. For those that grew up online, Millburn and Nicodemus had discovered a near enemy: if contentment is a goal, material wealth is no guarantee.

However, Millburn and Nicodemus are not the first of their generation to claim dissatisfaction, launch a blog, and attempt to parlay that into a self-help writing career. Leo Babauta established *Zen Habits* at the start of 2007 with a focus on productivity. At the end of the year, he followed with the e-book *Zen to Done: The Ultimate Simple Productivity System*. In 2009, just as *Zen Habits* was peaking in popularity, he began a new blog, *mnmlist*, which was also followed by a complementary book. His conversion from hacking productivity to minimalism was seen, a few years later, in his recommendation to *Zen Habits* readers that they "toss productivity out": there's no sense in organizing the deck chairs of a sinking ship—simplify and chuck them overboard.<sup>32</sup> He never stopped blogging at *Zen Habits*, but his focus changed, and the many posts on *mnmlist* from 2009 to 2011 correspond with an intense popular interest in minimalism.

In this same period, Colin Wright swapped a life of one-hundred-hour workweeks for a life with less than one hundred things; he blogged about it at *Exile Lifestyle* and published best-selling Kindle books on minimalism and travel.<sup>33</sup> Dave Bruno parlayed his blog, *The 100 Thing Challenge*, into a 2010 book about "how I got rid of almost everything, remade my life, and regained my soul."<sup>34</sup> This story of a crisis, of regaining one's soul, and of a commitment to revolution was not unusual. Rita Holt (a pseudonym) wrote an e-book on minimalism and how, after collapsing in tears, she broke from a lifestyle she hated. When she finally realized "it was now or never," she quit her job, committed to a minimalist revolution, and invited readers to follow her travels on Twitter.<sup>35</sup>

## The Counting Nomad versus KonMari

In the past, if I thought about crafts, lifestyle, and household tips, Hints from Heloise came to mind. Yet life hacking has a masculine and high-tech sheen. So how do minimalist gurus compare to a more traditional source of household advice, to the feminine domesticity of Marie Kondo? In 2011, Kondo published a book describing her KonMari technique. She counseled millions of Japanese to discard whatever fails to spark joy.<sup>36</sup> The book was published in English in 2014, and despite Kondo's not speaking the language, she received more media attention than Millburn and Nicodemus. Obviously, the minimalists and Kondo share the idea of curating possessions. Also, they are both responses to a popular discontent with materialism and clutter, but the minimalists, unsurprisingly, are geekier. They show a fondness for counting, challenges, and travel.

A conspicuous facet of the minimalists' stories is the enumeration of possessions. Dave Bruno and *The 100 Thing Challenge* was the most visible example among many. Nick Winter, who wrote *The Motivation Hacker*, had ninety-nine things. Everett Bogue, the author of *The Art of Being Minimalist*, got down to fifty, before confessing he needed a few more items than that. Kelly Sutton, the blogger behind the *Cult of Less*, varied the formula: his goal was to condense his life into two boxes and two bags. The process of minimizing can make for a good story in itself. Tynan developed a protocol for what to keep, sell, toss, and give away; the last step made use of an ad on Craigslist announcing that everything in his house could be taken for free.<sup>37</sup>

All these men have lived in San Francisco and worked with computers, although minimalism isn't their exclusive province. Black minimalists such as Ylanda Acree are, according to the blog of the same name, building an intentional community for "simple living from a perspective that values our culture."<sup>38</sup> Courtney Carver's Project 333 challenged readers of her blog *Be More with Less* to "dress with 33 items or less for 3 months." In a post entitled "Women Can Be Minimalists Too," Carver highlights eight other women minimalists, including a pioneer in the tiny-house movement who has a list of ninety-seven things.<sup>39</sup> Minimalism isn't monolithic, but it is dominated by men and those who count their possessions.

Kondo doesn't care how many things you have, as long as they spark joy and are then neatly put away. Whereas minimalists approach possessions as a challenge to count and discard, Kondo approaches them with animistic care.

Objects are eager to serve and content with being bid farewell. In addition to her relationship to stuff being more relational, perhaps Kondo's appeal was that her story of exhaustion and insight was so dramatic. Kondo had been obsessed with organizing since childhood, which took a toll. One day, she "had a kind of nervous breakdown and fainted." Two hours later, "when I came to, I heard a mysterious voice, like some god of tidying telling me to look at my things more closely."<sup>40</sup> It told her to focus on the things to keep, rather than those things to throw away. The KonMari technique was born. Other differences between Kondo and other gurus include the recurrent gender imbalance: minimalists tend to be men, and Kondo's fans tend to be women. And many minimalists, unlike Kondo, are obsessed with travel.

Kevin Kelly labels himself a minimalist and began his globe-trotting decades before digital nomadism became a thing. Recall that Maneesh Sethi, inventor of the Pavlok wrist zapper, made a project of doing push-ups on exotic animals as he crossed the globe with only what he could fit in a backpack. Tim Ferriss traveled for eighteen months with next to nothing, though he made room for two books, Thoreau's *Walden* and Rolf Potts's *Vagabonding*. More recently, in 2017, he and Kelly traveled through Uzbekistan together. Leo Babauta regularly posts to *Zen Habits* about traveling lightly and how to maintain good habits and health while doing so. He also writes about traveling with a family, which is unusual but a welcome departure. Rita Holt asked the readers of her blog to follow her on Twitter as she began her international voyage of minimalist revolution. Colin Wright let the readers of *Exile Lifestyle* vote on which country he would live in for the next four months.

More so than any of these minimalists, Tynan exemplifies the "life nomadic," never settling anywhere for long and calling an RV his home base for almost a decade. In 2016, Tynan sold the RV but continued to live on cruise ships and at his other bases, including the island he and his friends bought in Nova Scotia. He writes that all of this is now normal for him, and he feels at home in Budapest, Las Vegas, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo. Because most of his friends have a similar lifestyle, he is as likely to see them in these cities as their putative homes.

In short, the much-to-minimal story is one of liberation with ecstatic undertones. The traditional route, with its trapping of material success, prompts a crisis. Discontent and a breakdown are followed by insight. Throw off your career and possessions; write and travel the world as a missionary of minimalism.

## The Dilemma of Stuff

Many life hackers told their much-to-minimal story during the 2009–2011 heyday, especially those who managed to become globe-trotting writers. But the minimalist tale eventually grew stale.

Among minimalist gurus, Graham Hill is not unusual. He is a tech-savvy entrepreneur who achieved success at an early age. His ventures included a web design consultancy in the 1990s and the popular *TreeHugger* blog in the naughts. He sold both of these for good money, and at one point had a 3,600-square-foot house in Seattle and a 1,900-square-foot loft in Manhattan, each of which he felt obliged to fill with stuff. Not surprisingly, his life was growing ever more complicated: “The things I consumed ended up consuming me. My circumstances are unusual (not everyone gets an internet windfall before turning 30), but my relationship with material things isn’t.” Hill’s moment of insight came about when his girlfriend’s visa expired. He returned with her to Barcelona, where they lived in a tiny flat “totally content and in love before we realized that nothing was holding us in Spain. We packed a few clothes, some toiletries and a couple of laptops and hit the road. We lived in Bangkok, Buenos Aires and Toronto with many stops in between.” Along the way he rid himself of “all the inessential things I had collected” and began to “live a bigger, better, richer life with less.”<sup>41</sup>

Hill shared his story in 2013, in the pages of the *New York Times* Sunday Review. He complemented his own experiences with damning statistics about American consumption, waste, and pollution. Hill concluded the piece by noting that he remained a serial entrepreneur and that his latest venture was designing small homes for those equally concerned about their freedom and environmental impact. I believe he expected kudos: Hill had been successful but stressed, and when he learned how to live a better life, he wanted to help others do the same. Yet Hill’s timing, wealth, and tone led to criticism instead.

It isn’t hard to see why people were getting tired of minimalism. Not everyone wants to live in an Apple store. Minimalism is a relatively sterile aesthetic and creativity sometimes requires messiness. Minimalists are extreme, and people’s initial curiosity eventually turns to distaste. Also, the public lost patience with minimalists, especially the millionaires. Minimalists can be preachy, which is grating when the sermon is self-congratulatory. Rather than a high-minded philosophy, maybe minimalism is a personality

defect or a delusion? Thomas sees digital minimalism as an attempt by the insecure to regain control, which only furthers “the fantasy of the technofix”; sadly, their “escape from stuff is, ironically, as tied to stuff as the world of stuff they are trying to leave behind.”<sup>42</sup>

A wickedly funny satire of the minimalist personality is Alexei Sayle’s short story “Barcelona Chairs”—it is prescient too, as it was written in 2001. The story is about rupert (with a lowercase “r”), an overly controlling architect whose house is an “oasis of light and space.” The house’s metal chairs are striking but painful to sit on, the glass staircase is spectacular but terrifying to the children, and no household item can be seen or found. Still, this is better than clutter: “that was the thing about minimalism, it was demanding, and asked a lot of you, everything that was in the minimalist room was balanced on a hair trigger of harmony, every object was precisely where it was supposed to be and the slightest thing out of place threw the whole delicate equilibrium into utter chaos.” One day rupert comes home to discover that one of his walls, which had been “clean and pristine and white as a sea mist,” has a baffling word scrawled on it: “PATRICK.” His efforts to have it cleaned, painted, and chiseled away only compound the disfigurement. He suffers a breakdown and drinks bleach, “reducing the untidy tangle of his insides to a minimalist shell.”<sup>43</sup> Luckily, he is found by his family’s Finnish au pair and survives. To recover, he and his family move to a quaint whitewashed farmhouse in southern Spain. rupert lets go, and he lets his hair grow. Yet over time, his personality reasserts itself. One day, he can take it no more and screams at his family about the mess. That night, his wife goes outside to the “white moonlit wall of the farmhouse” and writes in tiny letters: “PATRICK.” If only Steve Jobs had read this, perhaps he could have avoided some of the anxiety and injury caused by the glass staircases and walls in Apple stores.

Beyond a dislike for pretense and prissiness, the simplest reason for minimalist exhaustion was that it was a fad at the end of its hype cycle: Hill published his essay after the tide had turned. In 2011, Everett Bogue pulled his e-book, *The Art of Being Minimalist*, from distribution and replaced it with an essay at [fuckminimalism.com](http://fuckminimalism.com). Simply, Bogue felt minimalism had done its job; it was time to move on. Rita Holt did so in 2012. When I asked her why her website had disappeared, she explained that minimalism had grown into a popularity contest, a race for clicks, shares, and e-book sales: “It just seemed like a facade, another pattern we all fell into, though shouting all



the while we weren't like the rest of the herd. So I got out. Scrapped the website, all the posts, any links or interviews I may have put out there."<sup>44</sup>

Fads come and go, and individuals have different personalities and tastes. Even so, in self-help, individual behavior happens within a social context. Choices are informed by and affect others, be it opting for cosmetic surgery, boosting productivity, or decluttering. The important question, then, is: What assumptions underlie the self-help advice that is given?

### Minimalism and Millionaires

For the well-meaning, there is a paradox inherent in shopping. If you choose the path of quality and sustainability at a higher price, are you acting the part of an entitled snob? A writer at *The Atlantic's* CityLab suspects so after attending one of Hill's presentations for his new venture, LifeEdited. She writes, with a hint of covetous censure, that his slides featured "featherweight towels, colorful nesting bowls, easily stored hot plates... all fancy and sleek and very desirable."<sup>45</sup> An item that costs twice as much and lasts four times as long is a good deal, but it's not a deal everyone can afford.

Going the inexpensive route, in solidarity with the less fortunate, is not necessarily better. A writer at *The Nation* believes inexpensive products are made at the expense of the environment and workers. Although his *New York Times* piece is "a majestic display of guileless narcissism," Hill did not did not go far enough in scolding Americans for "how they actually spend too little on the goods that they do buy"<sup>46</sup>

These two takes are at odds, which is to be expected. When a fad loses its footing, everyone tries to take advantage of its fall. Even so, the story of minimalism does yield two insights into life hackers' relationship with stuff.

First, it's ironic but fitting that minimalism, which makes so much of the *Zen* label, followed the story of Buddhism's founder. In the origin tales of Buddhism, the parents of Prince Siddhārtha sheltered him from evidence of human suffering and gave him every luxury. But the prince was discontent. Early one morning, observing the disorder and ugliness after a late-night party, Siddhārtha decided he was done—it was now or never, as Holt writes about her own break. He sneaked away, leaving everything behind, and began his travels. He experimented with different lifestyles but gravitated toward asceticism, including fasting and forgoing sleep. After years of this, Siddhārtha collapsed by the roadside and was found by a girl and revived

with a cup of rice milk. He concluded that extreme asceticism was no better than the extreme luxury his parents provided. He would later teach the middle way, a path between the extremes.

Many minimalists, too, concluded that extremes were not the way. They had escaped the enemy of too much stuff, only to fall prey to the near enemy of too little. Everett Bogue and Rita Holt abandoned the minimalist label altogether. Dave Bruno stopped keeping careful count. Colin Wright confessed extremes are easy for him and they sell books, but balance is the goal. Others counseled moderation: consumerism was not the answer, but neither was fetishizing minimalism. Even *Lifehacker*, in 2017, posted an entry about the trap of keeping up with the minimalist Joneses.<sup>47</sup> As a counterculture, minimalism had strayed far from the values of the *Whole Earth Catalog*: self-sufficiency had been displaced by convenience, value by luxury, and accessibility by exclusiveness. Minimalism needed a reform.

Greg McKeown, a Silicon Valley leadership guru, undertook a rebranding effort in 2014 with *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*.

The way of the Essentialist means living by design, not by default. Instead of making choices reactively, the Essentialist deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the nonessentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage. In other words, Essentialism is a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless.<sup>48</sup>

“Minimalism” isn’t mentioned in the book, but speaking of “the way” has a Zen feel, and McKeown does stress lifestyle design and systematization. This is still Silicon Valley self-help. Even so, it is a moderate approach that stresses apportioning focus toward life priorities, a common self-help recommendation.

In addition to the insight about moderation, a second is that we must take care in making assumptions. Charlie Lloyd, writing at Tumblr, captures this best. Although Lloyd works in a technical field, lately he’s “been mostly on the lower end of middle class.” In his backpack, which would never make *Lifehacker*, he carries a three-year-old laptop and, because the battery is dead, its power supply. His backpack has paper and pens and a cable to charge his old phone: “It has gum and sometimes a snack. Sunscreen and a water bottle in summer. A raincoat and gloves in winter. Maybe a book in case I get bored.” Things would be different if he had more money: he would carry a MacBook Air and an iPad Mini; anything else could be bought as needed.

As with carrying, so with owning in general. Poor people don't have clutter because they're too dumb to see the virtue of living simply; they have it to reduce risk. ... If you buy food in bulk, you need a big fridge. If you can't afford to replace all the appliances in your house, you need several junk drawers. If you can't afford car repairs, you might need a half-gutted second car of a similar model up on blocks, where certain people will make fun of it and call you trailer trash.<sup>49</sup>

In short, rich people have the relationship between minimalism and wealth backward: "You can only have that kind of lightness *through* wealth." It is this relationship, and minimalism's bland demographics, that leads to the suspicion that minimalism is for well-off bachelors.

MacBook minimalism does require a certain amount of wealth, but we should be wary of overgeneralizing. Well-off people can be overtaken by stuff and can benefit from simplifying. Likewise, the poor are not immune to materialism, even if their desires remain unfulfilled or their stuff isn't as pricey. Having less is not necessarily a virtue, and having more is not necessarily a vice. The real problem is that self-help universalizes its advice, especially when the experiences of the successful and wealthy are presented as worthy and capable of emulation.

Soon after Hill's *New York Times* essay, Tynan posted a reflection, "The Less Fortunate," to his blog. He had just seen the documentary *Inocente*, the story of a homeless teenage girl who refuses to abandon her dreams, including marriage and a house. Tynan acknowledges that he was fortunate and that his lifestyle advice is at odds with *Inocente's* modest dreams: "Sometimes I rant about marriage and houses and how those are crappy goals. But you know what? That's for people like me who have been spoon-fed success from birth." Tynan has not faced the same issues of abuse and homelessness; the challenges *Inocente* faced, he feels, were "probably tougher than anything I can hope to do in my life."<sup>50</sup>

When bringing someone home to your RV, Tynan advises telling a story so that you are not confused with those who have no other choice. The stories that life hacking minimalists tell are of wealth: not necessarily about money, but about plentiful choice, about being able to pare down and travel the world—or even quit minimalism, as many have done, whenever they wish.

