**Greg McKeown – Episode Transcript**

Cal: Greg McKeown, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for being here today.

Greg: Cal, it's a pleasure to be with you. Thanks for having me.

Cal: This is so much fun for me. I have my copy of Essentialism here in front of me. It's all highlighted, it's been such a wonderful read. I first want to just publicly thank you for writing the book. And in fact, as I was reflecting, before this interview, I was thinking about you helped me identify what I call my three R's. And that is essential things for me, and they all happen to start with an R.

And that is that reading is absolutely essential for me. And that involves also reading the scriptures. It's just a habit that I find that if I do that, man, I'm just so much healthier. I'm a better husband, better father, better leader, all those things. The other R is running, exercise, some form of exercise. Just that is absolutely essential to me. And then the other R is reflection, and that also involves prayer and just thinking and processing life. So it's neat, and as we have this conversation today, just how much this has personally impacted me. So thank you so much, Greg, appreciate it.

Greg: Well, first of all, I just love that. I mean, I love that you've simplified it to those three things, something I was just writing about. I'm working on a new book, finally. And there's a chapter I've tried to put down, and it's a really simple idea. And it's like priority circles. What people typically do, and then what I think an essentialist does.

So what people seem to typically do is they put others at the center of about three concentric circles. That's all just living in their inbox. It's surfing social media, it's reacting, it's even many projects out there. It could be good projects, but they start with that stuff. And so then whatever's left over is the second ring, is their family and most important relationships, and that's often short trip because there's not much left over. And then the tiniest circle, final circle is the 'protect the asset' activities.

And because they're left right to the end, there's often nothing left. And if there is anything, it becomes quite mindless, like someone just told me that instead of going to sleep at midnight, she'll spend another couple of hours looking at Zillow properties, and almost purchasing properties. She has no business of purchasing that sort of thing.

Now, that's the non-essentialist way of doing it, but the essentialist approach is just to reverse it, protect the asset is first. That's the core. And then secondly, you're investing in family and you're able to do that better because you're investing in your own spiritual, physical, asset, first of all.

And then the third circle is other, where we get to contribute to meaningful projects. And we're better able to discern what those are. And to put good boundaries on them, because we have invested in our own asset first, the family-culture assets second, and then moving into those projects. So I think it's a very simple idea, but switching one for the other is, I think, critical. And what you just said is an illustration of it.

Cal: Yeah, and I think what you just described too highlights why essentialism is so important because the life of the non-essentialist is unsustainable. I think it's something that we think we can do for a little while. But in order to live a healthy life, and I love how in the book you talk about 'To make our highest contribution, we have to figure out what is truly essential.' Can you define for us, Greg, what essentialism is for those that aren't familiar with the book?

Greg: Look, it's the perpetual, continual disciplined pursuit of what's essential instead of the undisciplined pursuit of the non-essential. So it really means exploring more options than a non-essentialist will, because you're looking really broadly in pursuit of the right answer. The thing that really, really matters, and it's the trivial many. And number two, it means then once you found it, eliminating as much of the non-essential as is humanly possible.

And then finally, it means building a system that helps you to execute on what matters most. And ideally, it's a system that makes it easy, rather than one that you're constantly fighting and battling against. So instead of trying to push your essential boulder up the hill, you've constructed a system that allows you, you know, to push a boulder down a hill, which of course, it's a lot easier. It's true. So that's essentialism in that shot.

Cal: And you do a great job in the book of going through those steps. It's not just about identify, okay, what's truly important, what's not important, how to eliminate? And then how do we make this practical? How do we get to doing this? And it's also, I think, important, you point this out in the book. It's not a once-a-year thing, it's not maybe once a week, it's really every time we have to make a decision. And Greg, can you tell us your journey? How did you begin to explore essentialism? How did you decide to write this book? Where did that begin for you?

Greg: Well, look, it's you know, I often think that there's no real steps, failure is not a real thing. You can either succeed at something or you can learn from something. Right, failure is not a thing. So I learned my way to essentialism.

One of the experiences that was formative for me was when I got an email from my boss at the time, said, "Look, Friday, between 1:00 and 2:00 will be a bad time for your wife to have a baby because I want you to be at this client meeting." And really, everything that follows is just me not taking ownership of that moment and saying, "Okay, well, no, that's not going to be the priority. I'm going to be clear." And so I was just trying to struggle it. "Look, okay, you know, my wife goes into labor Thursday night, we're in the hospital, our daughter's born early morning, Friday morning,"

And instead of just being able to be free of all of it, and all the external pressure, I was holding on to that, worried about that and trying to keep everybody happy, and how can I go to the meeting? And will that be a problem for Anna? Will that be a problem for, you know, and the whole thing. And then so to my shame, I do go to the meeting, leave my hours-old baby, and I'm bearing. And I remember afterwards, my boss said, "Look, you know, the client will respect for the choice you just made," and maybe that's true, maybe they did, although the look on their faces didn't convince that sort of confidence for me.

But, I mean, it's clear I made a [00:07:10]. You know, I violated something more important for something less important. And, you know, what I learned from the lesson, from that experience was if you don't prioritize your life, someone else will, or something else will. And so it began this journey, not just to make sure that my life was in alignment with my highest priority, but also to discover why other people struggle with this. And so it's been this multi-year journey, a tremendous adventure to be able to maybe help a couple of people to really think through what matters and how they could get their life to be aligned to those things.

Cal: How much longer after that experience did you write the book?

Greg: Well, by the time the actual book was written, I mean, it was a good while later, it wasn't like a month later, I'm like, "Okay, that's it, I'm going to do it." But when it came time to try and work out what the book would be about, you know, that I realized was a key moment in scoring it.

Cal: And when you think about essentialism, do you think about it individually and also organizationally? I know you work with a lot of giant tech companies.

Greg: Well, you know, it's an important part of the story because I was working with companies in Silicon Valley at the time. And so what I noticed there was a pattern that they were going through. You know, these small companies or organizations would, in the early days, were very focused in just a few things that led to success. And that success created options and opportunities, which of course, all sounds like the right problem to have, but it does in fact turn out to be a problem, with it leads to what Jim Collins has called 'the undisciplined pursuit of more.'

And so, you know, this paradox of success that I was observing at the organization on team level, I also then just observed it as a personal thing, and I realized, "Well, look, this isn't a business question, this is a human question." And as I have gone on to research this and then work with organizations, you know, now all over the world, I have observed that, you know, people know this pattern, even if they haven't put words on it. And once you can put words on it, once you can label it, you can avoid some of the highest costs of non-essentialism, of trying to do everything for everyone without really thinking about it. You can start to choose a different way of doing life and doing leadership. The default part of even successful-driven capable people is to feel busy but not productive, stretched too thin at work or at home, and feeling like your day has been hijacked by other people's agenda for you.

And so the alternative path, the different choice is to live life as an essentialist. And to do it before you have to. Right now, the whole world is sort of involuntarily essentialist. And that's the next best thing, you know, because at least somebody has to really ask the question, what matters, what really matters when I don't have all the options available? Which things should I do? When I'm having to transform my team, my organization, you know, my own family, when I'm having to transform all of that, I have to reprioritize.

So it is a good opportunity for us to, you know, individually and as leaders figure out what the priority is now. But even in good times or in, you know, exceptionally bounteous times, you know, essentialism can be something you choose voluntarily even then, and to great advantage.

Cal: Have you been talking to people during this COVID-19 period as we're recording about essentialism? I'm curious, what are they saying? Are people more open to it now than perhaps they have been before, or are people identifying things they didn't see before?

Greg: Yeah, I mean, really, look, my sense is that, like the whole world... I mean, I've never seen anything like it, really. Like the whole world is being confronted with effectively the question I posed in essentialism. Right, like, what is essential? I mean, literally, like almost the whole world is discussing this. And it's a global timeout. Right, you know like, you all just go to your rooms and have a think about it.

And in that is of course a challenge, and that challenge is affecting different people in different ways. Some immensely acutely, some barely feeling it. But everybody is still affected by it. And the opportunity is that, you know, while we had the Great Depression in the Great Recession, this can be 'The Great Reset.'

And I in some ways, I think it already is. It's not even just a question my will in the future, what will happen, it already is something that I mean, there was just a YouGov poll in the UK that said that only 9% People want to go back to the way things were before. So even if you don't know what the future will be, and even if, you know, there are challenges ahead, it's already a reset for someone to even discover that, for someone to even think about it. My goodness, some things are a lot harder than they were before but some things are a lot better than they were before.

You know, we like going out in our neighborhood. We see all the time that families walking past, you've seen it before. Families going on a bike ride, and we just got some of our bikes fixed on Saturday, and they notice that the bike shop that I normally go, as a notice that there's 3x the demand of biking fixing, new bikes, everything. 3x over the last two months. And I talked to somebody when I went in and he said, no one in the biking industry predicted this, we didn't know this is what was going to happen.

So there's been... I mean, really, as I say, it's not just even a future possibility. There is a great reset that's happened. The question we have to ask as leaders of our own lives and of our teams is what will we create now? And how can we make sure that what we create now is essential, is really important, really matters rather than just, you know, I guess trying to get back to some former state that I personally think is never coming again. We're not going to go back to some...

Cal: And Greg, what do you say to that person that maybe like me is seeing life with fresh eyes right now. I'm being forced to see all the buziness that I had before this happened. I'm seeing... I'll be honest, things I missed out on with my daughter when I was too busy at work. Now, we're going in the back, and hiking, and looking for four-leaf clovers, and all the precious moments of life that I will never regret, and I will always cherish them. What do you say to someone like me or the many people out there that are seeing things, and they want things to be different, but things are going to get busy again. What would you say to them? What advice would you give them?

Greg: I mean, first of all, just well done to people. You know, I've seen many evidences of people making good and positive choices in this situation, and keep talking about them. And in the essentialist community, where I spent a lot of, you know, my time professionally talking with people, I hear this feedback a lot that there is a lot of good in this experience, and they're taking advantage of that.

And I think that because we've had a collective experience, let's... I know it's not the same, but if you compare it to other great societal shifts that have happened before, you know, the Great wars, when people have been through all the great depression, where people have gone through these experiences, they come out changed. But in a way, you can't be... It'd be very abnormal to come out the same. And so I think we will all have a shorthand forever, where we go, "Yeah, I remember what it was like then." And so we'll always have something to be able to go back to and celebrate in the end to try to design our lives differently.

So I think that's what I would say. I would say, you know, well done to people. And you can build on this, you can build on the successes, and build a self-sustaining positive upward cycle around essentialism, if you'll celebrate the successes you're having right now.

Cal: Yeah, I think that's great. And I would recommend reading the book Essentialism, because it does give a great framework. Greg, why do we have this tendency towards the non-essentialist lifestyle? What are the whys behind that and the reasons behind that in your view?

Greg: And I think there's a couple that are relevant here. I mean, one is that success paradox that I noticed working with organizations is, has become societal. So we live, still, even right now, as we're doing this recording in the most extraordinary time in human history. Right, like, I wouldn't choose to live in any time or any place, but here and now. Not in the whole of human history, not back a few months ago, not back a few decades ago, not hundreds of years ago. This is the best time, the best, the most democratic time in terms of just like legal democracy and freedom, the healthiest time, the most educated time.

I mean, you are more likely to live a whole, and healthy, and free life today than in any time in human history. Okay, that's good news and we all ought to remember it maybe a little better than we do sometimes.

But also, we've got to realize that what comes with that are success traps. As a friend of mine puts it to me, I think so well, he said, "Success traps can be harder to get out of than failure traps." So, with a failure trap, at least you're incentivized to change, but with the success trap, you're incentivized to carry on and just do more and more of what you're doing, or been doing. And so you start to plateau. And what that looks like, what it means is the internet happened, hyper-connectivity happened, social interaction, social media happened. And all of those forces can be tremendously good, they can be very powerful tools. But they can be so powerful that they can make us the tool and we become the servant of it.

And so, as this massive expansion of choices has happened, individuals who are not choosing to become more selective will be completely overwhelmed by this tidal wave of options and choices. That's not something to bemoan, but it's not something to be blind to either. And for many of us who have basically grown up in this reality, it's invisible.

And so we really need to discover it, we need to be aware, "Oh, this isn't really the normal state of civilization, it's just as our norm." And so therefore, we have got to be careful. It's all good things, but I can say it this way, maybe they're first world problems, but that doesn't make them less problems.

So we have to become, you know, as all these options and success in society and chances and the learning and everything have just expanded massively, not a little, not incrementally, exponentially, where you can learn anything now. Anything, absolutely anything, and for almost for free. And that has just simply never existed in the course of humanity. You can go back and read John Adams and these extraordinary Founding Fathers that I've spent piece amount of time doing, and the emphasis they put on being able to buy books is great. Is an evidence of success because it's so hard to come by them, it's so expensive and so not available to everybody. And now it is, all of them. All of this literature is available, all the books they paid so much for, we can get for free.

In that huge change in the human condition, we have to somehow change our selectivity. We make sure that we actually take advantage of the best of that, and don't just become a pawn in the whole story to be battered about by non-essential options that the internet and social media will also provide, you know, infinite pool of options for us.

Cal: I think one of the things that I've struggled with the most, Greg, is the social pressure to say yes. And that might just be my personality. My wife has helped me with that over the years. I remember we were living in Hawaii, and I got invited to go surfing, this is very early in our marriage. And I didn't even think about it. I was like, of course, I'm gonna go surfing. This is with friends, and we were probably in our first year. And I remember her kind of asking a question that hinted it, like, maybe you should think about the fact that you could say no to these people.

And it was a lightbulb moment for me. It was like, "Wow, you're right. I could say no," I'm not very good at saying no, but she's really, really helped me. And I think her personality just a little bit better at being willing to say no, but do you find too that so often we attach the relationship or are worried about the pressure, what's that gonna mean if I say no to my boss or if I say no to a friend, what is that going to mean for the relationship?

Greg: Yeah, of course, right? I mean, say, look, I totally advocate saying no to non-essentials, really. But let's explore it a bit. First, I don't advocate saying no to everyone and everything without really thinking about it. That would be a different book altogether, right, that'd be a book called 'no-ism.' And I wrote Essentialism.

So the key is to say yes to what is most essential, and to say no, where you have the direct power to do that, the control to do that. I can say no to mindless checking email and social media late at night. Right, I have the power to do that. I can choose to not have my phone in my bedroom. I can have it somewhere else. So it's not the first thing that you pick up on in the morning and you're are just attached all day long. Those things are within my sphere of influence, I can just do that.

And all the time, the point is to say no to the non-essential stuff, not just to say no to stuff. As you move into relationships, of course, you also move into the world of influence and negotiation, rather than simply saying no. Saying no isn't going to work in all sorts of scenarios, I see them in the military. They don't just say no. But, nevertheless, if you get into a mindset that says all the only two options you have in your relationships with other people, with your peers, or in relationship even with people that you report to, if you get to the point where you say it's either a polite yes or rude no, and those are my only two polar opposite options, you're in trouble. So that's like really severe self-disempowerment. Because, first of all, you get bound to say polite yeses a lot more anyway. But if that's the only option, how empowered are you? You become just an order taker.

What you want to be in your relationships, and even with your superiors in an institution is you want to move up the value chain so that you can become a trusted adviser. Well, how do you do that? Maybe at first, you say yes to just show that you're competent, show that you're on their side, but then at some point, you need to learn how to become effective negotiator to be able to speak in terms of the other person's interest, for example. To say, when they ask you something, yes, I would be happy to do that. I can see how that would help you to achieve XYZ. But let me talk about what I think might be an even better use of my time that would help you to achieve what you're trying to do. Let's have a conversation, and you enter into a negotiation.

So I think that it's discovering that there's this third option that is so critical in being able to apply essentialism interpersonally, and in teams, and even with superiors.

Cal: Are there specific words that you would advise someone to use when they're trying to negotiate or even maybe when they're saying no, are there certain words that you have found to be helpful to have more of a graceful no or attempt to have that third option?

Greg: Yeah, I mean, something that happened to me that I think is really interesting, actually I have it written somewhere. So this is a little note that I received. This is from my daughter. I was trying to persuade her to read a book this one day, she reads lots of books. So she was not against that, but she had already commitments. And here we are, a pretty classic power differential, right, like, as the dad, I can, there's variety of leavers I could use to try and make her life difficult if she really doesn't want to do this. I could certainly raise my voice, or I could certainly try to, you know, all these things.

If she had only two items, polite yes, rude no, she might say the polite yes, whatever, but she's a teenager at this time, so she might just offer the rude no. So we had a conversation, right, came to my office here, and she slipped this note in my door. It's been laminated by someone, I'm sharing this where they wanted kept it for me.

Here's how she responded. You're looking for words you see for what to say. She said, "I already expressed my unwillingness to read this book, but I'm willing to make a counteroffer. I am not willing to read it all in one day today, but I'd be happy to explore the possibility of reading it in the future. Over the course of a few weeks, I believe it would be best to wait till the end my literature assignment. If you would like me to read this book in place of a separate assignment, and over the course of a few weeks, I'm sure that can be made possible."

Cal: Wow.

Greg: Yeah, she's 14 when she wrote then.

Cal: Oh my goodness.

Greg: And I think that's like a small, but real master class in the words. There is the polite no, there is the 'let's talk about the trade-offs. Let's admit them.' You know, in the name of being nice and respectful, we can't just completely ignore or violate principles of like honesty. When we say yes to everyone and everything, we are violating honesty in the act.

I've been to meetings myself, and not a few in which people talk about a number of things that we're all going to go and do. And people say yes, yes, and it's all this commitment, and yes, yes, yes. And people are so non-committal, really, that nobody even writes down the list. Like no one believes it's really all going to happen. There's just, it's just this facade, "Yes, yes, oh, we should do that, you should do that, I should do this, and we should have..." and just go away and carry on with the day.

As we remember, the principle of honesty is a vital role in human relations, we'll also recognize that we need to not simply say yes without thinking about it. So it's this combination of right courage and kindness that allows you to create a psychological safety to be able to have these kinds of conversations and if I think, in this note, captured it well.

Cal: Well, I hope your next book is on parenting.

Greg: It will be fun to do that. Wouldn't it be fun to have an essentialism book on parenting? Lots of people have suggested, I suggested it to my wife Anna, that either she does it or we do it together, and it would be fun to do at some point.

Cal: Yeah, that's amazing. Wow, perfect example. And I have over the years, I mentioned early in my marriage, I've over the years become a lot more comfortable saying no, and I have also started to respect people more who are willing to say no. I think that I often have also people in my life who will say, it's kind of semi-committal, but then at the last minute, it's a no. And I would just rather just be honest upfront, I can't do this, and you can explain it. You can be honest about it. In fact, I had a boss who was fantastic, a great leader. And she would stay pretty late in the office. And I needed to get out of the office at 5:36 because I had a little bit of a commute. And every day, I felt like I was saying no to the office to say yes to going home, and I worried about that every day, I almost had to sneak out of the office because I was worried that there was this negative view of me.

And then at the very end when she was doing our final review, she said to me, "Cal, I respected that so much." And it blew my mind. This whole time, I'm thinking that she was looking down on me for, you know, not being a team player, not staying late. Ultimately, she respected that. I think sometimes we have this false view that people view us as any number of ways, but really, I think a lot of times, people respect us when our no's are no and our yeses are yes.

Greg: Yeah, and just to add to that, like, if you go back to the hospital story, right, I don't know the answer to the question because I didn't experiment with that. Like, if I had just gone, oh, yeah, I'm in the hospital because I can't go, I might have got a perfectly positive response. But because of the fear of it, fear of missing out, the fear of, you know, I don't know, fear of something, I only know what happened by trying to say yes to both.

So in our own lives, I think we have to experiment with this and learn, explore what happens. One of the principles that I liked when I was doing the research for essentialism was the idea of a reverse pilot. The pilot's trying something out and seeing what the effects are, and reverse pilots do not do something to see what the effect is. And you're going to learn stuff in reverse pilots. You're going to learn whether people even notice something, whether it's even a problem.

I worked with an executive one time who, newly into his role, wasn't convinced that his predecessors and creation of a bi-weekly report for the rest of the executive team was being valued. It took about 50% of the resources of his whole department to generate this every two weeks. And so he just tried to experiment. He's like, "Okay, we're not going to do it. Let's just try not doing it for two weeks, and we'll see if anybody notices," and no one said anything. So they said, "Okay, we'll do it for four weeks, and we'll just see if anybody notices," no one ever asked it. They got a 50% rebate of his entire organization's resources just by experimenting.

If it had been a big problem, you could have of course had a discussion about it including "Yes, we'll do it again." Because it was clearly valuable, and what is the most valuable? What did you really miss, but just to keep doing everything that's been done in the past, and just presume it all needs to still be done is the way that systems become ever more complicated and more expensive to run. And I frankly do think the military is a pretty great illustration of this is, you know, often.

Cal: Yeah, I agree. Greg, I wanted to ask you. So you wrote the book, it's published, and one of the things about a book is it's published, and it's not something you can easily edit, I would imagine. I'm curious, is there anything now that you've had this in the public for a number of years now? Is there anything that you would add to it, subtract, change? I'm just curious now that you've had some time to marinate on it.

Greg: Yeah, there's two things. One is what I just said about negotiation, I would have emphasized that more and tried to make sure that it was clear that it's not just yes or no. Even the polite and graceful no, it doesn't have to just be a graceful no, it can be a negotiation around. The point isn't the no, the point is what's essential. The point is to have a discussion with your boss and to say with your file leader, and to say, look, what's the ratio of time you want me spending on value creation? In fact, I just was talking to Cal Newport I had interviewed for a podcast that, you know that I'm just launching The Essentialism Podcast, and he gave this great sort of way to have this conversation.

And he said, look, you can go to your manager and you can say, look, what's the ratio between value creation work I'm doing, and then just sort of keep the lights on work that I'm currently doing. And I would think that it's a decent way of thinking about essential and non-essential work in the way that I define it in Essentialism. It's like the stuff that's really going to push the needle forward, actually help us rise to another level of contribution as that kind of work, and then there's the stuff that's like, yeah, okay, well, we'll just carry on.

And so you have that discussion, you agree on it? Okay, well, maybe it's 50-50, let's say at first, you think. And then you go away, and you find that 95% of your time is being spent on just maintenance, keep the lights on, reacting, responding to people, and only 5% is actually helping us to go forward, you know, create that kind of breakthrough.

And so then, you're having a positive negotiation and a central negotiation because it's not just, 'Hey, no, I don't want to do it,' or 'I'm overwhelmed,' or, you know, 'I don't like this work.' No, that's nothing to not whatsoever, the conversation. You are trying to make sure that you are utilized at the highest point of contribution, you're doing the most valuable work so that you can actually help your fellow leader and your internal customers to be able to make a very, you know, to get the best results possible.

So that's one thing I would say differently, that I would want to emphasize differently.

Cal: Would you mind sharing the other?

Greg: Yeah, I am happy. I felt like I was monologuing there.

Cal: No, I thought that was great.

Greg: Number two is, it's not so much what I wrote in the book, but a perception people seem to have got sometimes from it. I'll explain the difference. The assumption I've heard sometimes from people is like, well, actually, somebody literally said to me. He said, "Oh, I really liked Essentialism, but it should come with a warning. And the warning is, this will be the hardest thing that you will ever do."

You know, like, "It's hard. This is hard. Essentialism is hard. It's good, it's great, it's important, but it's hard." And I just absorbed that feedback actually of when I heard that. I thought, oh, I should tell people about, "Well, essentialism is really important, but it's really hard."

And what I didn't know as I was doing that is how much of a stereotype idea I was fitting into. The stereotype is that anything worth doing is exceptionally hard. Yeah, like, it's gonna take momentous effort to do anything that matters. And it's actually shocking to me, how deep-set that assumption is.

But as I have proceeded in my journey, and in fact, it is written in Essentialism, the final quarter of the book presumes that there are easier ways to build systems to make execution, not that kind of painful, hard experience. But I've gone much more deeply into that now over the last few years in working with people. And my conclusion is that much of that is just a false assumption.

And it's so deep set, I can hardly express it. People just accept it as the truth. Well, the reason I do x, that's trivial is because it's easy. And the reason I don't do the essential is because it's hard. And it's as simple as that. But I think you can make things easy and essential. Yes, we do the easy stuff, fine, I accept that. So let's make essentials the easiest things to do.

And this is, I think, truly possible. And I wish that, you know, I don't know if I wish I could change the book exactly, but I definitely want to emphasize and illustrate that, going forward, and then to be able to really help people discover that they can do this. I can do this. Being an essentialist is easier than being a non-essentialist, I believe it.

Cal: I wonder if, have you found that it's harder for certain personality types? Because we all are very different. I think that's one thing I discover with my wife is through Myers Briggs and the enneagram, any number of different ways you learn about yourself and you learn about others, have you discovered that certain personality types find this to be easier than others?

Greg: I don't know that that's the case, because essentialism isn't saying that you ought to be like somebody else. It's saying, you figure out what the right thing is for you to be doing, given your personality traits, given your unique and essential mission in life. I mean, just ripping just for a second, I look more on this idea of easy versus hard. This is a biblical reference, but, you know, as I've started to share this clarification around central things can be easy. Yes, sometimes people feel quite uncomfortable with that idea. It's, you know, it feels like an oxymoron to them. Essential things can be the easiest things? I mean, it's exciting, really, and it's um, what's the group that came over originally, the bay fire...

Cal: The Pilgrims?

Greg: The Pilgrims, yeah, The Pilgrims came over, and then there's a particular Christian philosophy at the time, tell me if you remember.

Cal: Oh, Puritanism.

Greg: Puritanism. Is it's maybe tied back to a sort of Puritan idea that hard equals good. That sacrifice and pain is righteous. And so if you frame it that way, then easy is wicked and wrong. And so you can go a long, long time with that core assumption, keeping you in you know, basically, frankly, keeping you away from doing important things. Because my goodness, they're hard, and we're wired to do what's easy, so we'll just go to the trivial easy instead of the vital hard.

And so as I went to study that biblically, I've studied every reference to ease and relate to words. Right, like what comes up, I mean, you can finish the sentence for me. My yoke is...

Cal: Easy.

Greg: Easy. My burden is...

Cal: Light, yes. There. There you go, yeah.

Greg: Yeah, so I didn't have to like stretch to the edges of, you know, of the Christian canon or to some obscure reference by somebody observing something. I didn't have to go to some strange interpretation of gospel to find this reference, right. It's in the Sermon on the Mount. It's in the core of the Christian canon. My yoke is easy. My burden is light. And yet, I think if you spoke to most people in the church, and of course, it's applicable beyond that, but just using this application for a second. I think almost everybody would describe their experiences being different to that. Church is hard. The service is hard. Doing the work is hard. And actually, it's not only that they would say that and be honest about it, it is part of what makes them good. It's part of, you know, I am sacrificial, I have sacrificed myself. So that is good, it's an evidence of my goodness that I am doing something that's painful. And look, I'm not anti-sacrifice, but I am anti calling stuff hard that could actually be easy, especially when it's right there in the scriptures.

Cal: Yeah. No, that's so fascinating. Thank you for sharing that. It makes me... When I kind of combine essentialism with atomic habits, it kind of put those two concepts together. You know, one of the things that James Clear talks about is, you know, in order to form a habit, you have to make it easy. And I think there might be some synthesis there between the two ideas of trying to create new habits that are in line with essential things in your life that allow you to live and ultimately have your highest contribution. So I think that's really great, Greg, thanks for sharing that.

And I wanted to ask you, because one of the tag lines of this show, this show is all about intentional living. And at the end, I tend to talk about how life is short. Let's make it count. And one of the things I've heard you talk about as we're kind of wrapping up here, is having a longer view of life. And I've heard you even talk about going beyond birth to death. Can you talk to us a little bit about that and how that potentially gives us the courage to live an essentialist life, and this might be the last question, because I know we're running out of time here.

Greg: Yeah, look at, we're all old news. We're all on the way out. And you can test this in a really simple way using the hundred-year vision. You say okay, let's go back 100 years for a second. And like, who listening to this can name first and last name of their great grandparents? Typically, it's less than 5% of the group I've actually asked this in person to. And often way less, like 1% maybe. And they're not even sure, maybe I could on.

So we're talking about the majority of people, the vast majority of people cannot name the first and last name for their great grandparents. They got great grandparents, it's not like some massive amount of information. And these people are not trivially connected to us, they are the language we speak is often because of them. The country we live in is often because of them. That's just the obvious stuff. Our DNA is directly from them, our cultural DNA is often hugely influenced by them. So there's this tremendous impact that these people have had, and we can't even name them. We might not even know who they are.

So, okay, that's like there's all sorts to be garnered from that. But now let's just carry on with that thought experiment, we go 100 years in the future, which I did one time on a flight, it made me feel really weird actually, like, was a cool way, you are like a high up on a building and you've looked over, and you feel, what's the word I'm looking for?

Cal: Vertigo maybe, or?

Greg: Vertigo. And it gave me like, it was like intergenerational vertigo, where I just was like, "Whoa, what just happened?" And I just took an Excel spreadsheet out, and I put every year from the moment I was sitting there 100 years into the future. And then I put my age every year going forward, my children's age every year going forward, and then an estimate of where my grandchildren or great grandchildren would be as well. And the vertigo came from realizing that first of all, on 100 year scale from this moment because I'm gone, right, that's obvious, you know, we were already gone way before you get to the end of that list.

But not only that. What's really quite awful at first is the discovery that like my children are completely gone too. 100 years in the future, they're not around. My grandchildren are probably gone, and my great grandchildren are actually getting old. So within 100 years of now, my great grandchildren could easily have the same relationship with me as I have with my great grandparents, which is that I'm forgotten, it's done.

Okay, so this breaking of birth till death thinking, which is sort of metal box that limits our understanding of who we are and what matters. When we burst that, we discover two things at the same time. They're two sides of the same coin, same insight. One is, the first seems depressing, but then it's actually deeply inspiring. The depressing part is what I already illustrated, we will, they will not remember us. So this whole idea of legacy, legacy, that's what it's all about, legacy. It's like, yeah, I might be overrated. You might be putting a lot of effort on something that doesn't deliver very much value. Say it that way.

Because even as we mentioned, John Adams and the Founding Fathers, most people, even those that care about the Founding Fathers or read about them and so on cannot come close to even naming all of the people that signed the Declaration of Independence. So if you don't remember your great grandparents or the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the people are not remembering you, right? That isn't what... That's not your future. That's the depressing part. Or it can be for some people.

The second side of it, what's inspiring is that impact outlast memory. 100 years from now, yeah, whether they remember is not fine, whatever, doesn't matter. We released from them. But they will be impacted by the choices we make right now.

Making the next choice that I make with the perspective in mind that my decision will have tremendous impact for people who don't even know me gives me great responsibility to make this decision wisely. To try to focus on what investment will help, it's an anonymous way of living, because eventually we're all going to be anonymous. You get rid of the ego that keeps us trapped into trying to make decisions that make us the center of the story. Get rid of that, be released from that, and then you just get to live your mission. Do what matters. And your contribution is expanded immensely, and actually blesses many lines. So it's an interesting paradox, but one that I think really matters.

Cal: Wow. Well, with that inspiring thought, we'll leave it at that. Greg, real quick, tell us about your podcast as we're wrapping up here.

Greg: I'm delighted to be able to finally have a way to communicate directly with people through a podcast. For years, the only thing people have really been able to do is read the book and then re-read it. And honestly, that's often what people say they do, is a way to re-energize themselves around what is essential, even reading it every year. But now, we have this chance, starting in June, every Monday to be able to inject this ounce of Essentialism into our thinking as we start the week.

And the conversations I've had so far, that you know, the first, as I say, will drop the beginning of June, but they've been so inspiring to me. And I genuinely see the need in my own life once a week to have this, you know, chance. And so what I would advise people to do is subscribe wherever you subscribe to podcasts, but also find a design partner who can listen as well with you. And so then, the conversation continues with you after you've listened. And we can really build and grow this community of people who care about investing in what really matters. So yeah, it's called Essentialism with Greg McKeown, and we'll start every Monday in June.

Greg: I'm so excited. I've already subscribed. And guys, go check it out, because it's an incredible continuation of the great work that Greg has already done with the book. Greg, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for your life, and the great work you continue to do. I pray for you and your family as you all continue to navigate this COVID-19 and the work that you continue to do, thank you so much.

Cal: It's so much my pleasure. God bless you as well.