



**Episode 775: Minimalism: Liberate Yourself and Live a More Meaningful Life with Less Stuff?**

**Guest: Joshua Fields Millburn**

**WOODS:** Oh, this is going to be great, man. This is going to be a great conversation. I watched your documentary; I watched *The Minimalists*, and I watched it with the three oldest of my five girls, so 13, 11, and 10, because I thought this is going to provoke a good conversation afterward, and they're old enough to understand what's being discussed in the film. And by the way, the people they liked the most in the film were you and your friend.

**MILLBURN:** Me and Ryan, yeah.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's right. It wasn't always the academics they liked so much, but they definitely liked you two guys. They liked how real and authentic you were and the fact that when you would have an event that was sparsely attended you put that in there and you made clear that it wasn't always speaking to the gigantic audience that you have now. This was a long slog to get out there and get your ideas out. Give me the two-minute version of what *The Minimalists*, both the cause and the documentary, are all about.

**MILLBURN:** Let's see. I'm 35 years old now, but when I was 28 I was sort of living this American dream. I had everything that I thought I ever wanted: the six-figure salary, the big house in the suburbs with more toilets than people, and the closets full of expensive clothes, the luxury car, all of the things that were supposed to make me happy. I was really living the American dream. But then my mom died and my marriage ended, both in the same month, and these two events really forced me to look around and start to question what had become my life's focus, basically, and I realized that I was so focused on the wrong stuff. I was so focused on so-called success and achievement and especially on the accumulation of stuff, these sort of trinkets of success. And I realized that I had lost sight of what was important. In fact, I didn't even know what was important anymore, and it turns out I was forsaking many of the most important things in my life and instead chasing a very narrow vision or version of success.

And so after those two events happened, I started down this other rabbit hole. I discovered this thing called minimalism and found this whole community of people online. And the thing that was really appealing to me was that there were all these different types of minimalists. In the film there's a guy named Colin Wright, who's this young entrepreneur and everything he owns fits in his backpack. He owns like 52

items, and he travels to a new country every four months. And in fact, he doesn't even pick the country that he's going to; he outsources that to the readers of his website, and they kind of vote where he's going to go next, and he writes about that.

**WOODS:** Wow.

**MILLBURN:** Yeah, it's really interesting and admirable, but, Tom, I imagine you're somewhat like me, knowing you and your show. I didn't want that same lifestyle.

**WOODS:** That wouldn't work for me, no.

**MILLBURN:** (laughing) I had no desire to be the peripatetic writer who travels in perpetuity. So then I found these other minimalists, like Leo Babauta and his wife Eva; he's also in the film. And he has six kids, and he's sort of this ultraminimalist and has this whole minimalist family. And I realized that there were all these different flavors of minimalism, and all these people led considerably different lives, whether they were in the city or the suburbs, they lived in tiny homes or lived on a farm somewhere. What I realized is that all these different people were living these different lives, but they shared similar values. They were all trying to live a more meaningful life, and the way they were accomplishing that was by getting this excess out of the way that allowed them to refocus on what was important.

And so for me, my journey into minimalism started with a question: How might your life be better with less? And by answering that question I was really able to identify what the benefits of simplifying my life were, instead of just how to declutter my closet. I think we all understand "here are the 67 ways to declutter your closet." That's not as appealing to me as why should I do this, why is it important for me. And initially, it was, you know what? It'll give me an opportunity to regain control of my finances, because in the corporate world I made a few hundred thousand dollars a year, and I was really successful. I was the director of operations for 150 retail stores in Cincinnati, Ohio. And you know what? I realized that even though I was making good money, I was spending even better money. And as you know, that equation doesn't work. It hasn't worked in our government, and it certainly doesn't work in my individual life, because I don't have the ability to print my own money. So now I'm in a massive amount of debt, and even though people think I'm successful in my late 20s, I had all this anxiety and stress and overwhelm and insecurity associated with the life I was living, and by letting go of this lifestyle I could start focusing on what was actually important to me.

**WOODS:** One thing that I was really happy about in this documentary was there's a point where Ryan is talking about somebody, a hypothetical person, who has a huge book collection.

**MILLBURN:** Uh huh.

**WOODS:** And the answer he gives, he makes clear is that the message you guys have is beyond simply, Don't have so much stuff, that material things are bad or any such thing as that. It's much deeper than that, because he was envisioning a person who takes tremendous intellectual delight from his books and even just the physical

pleasure of holding the book and that each one has great meaning for him, and being deprived of that library of books would impoverish him very much. And Ryan says, well, you know what, keep your books. Obviously your books are very meaningful to you. And I thought, okay, good, because otherwise – I thought that was a very human response. It wasn't that there's one size that fits all, and I say you've got to clear out all those shelves because it'll give you a meaningful life. In his case it wouldn't.

**MILLBURN:** No, and I think that's the interesting thing here. In fact, I wish there was this list of, well, Tom, here's the hundred items you should own and then you'll be happy, because that would be much easier and I could just give you a pamphlet, and that would be the key to happiness. But I think quite often one of the problems we have is we try to pursue happiness through other people's templates, and so we'll say I should have this big library or I should have this big house or I should have this or that or whatever it may be, this trinket, and it's supposed to make me happy. We're constantly pursuing happiness through these ephemeral pleasures that we've been told will make us happy, and I think the truth is there's nothing inherently wrong with a particular material possession or any item. Consumption isn't the problem. We all need some stuff.

As I talk about in the documentary, compulsory consumption is the problem. Thinking we're supposed to buy something because it's going to make us less stressed or better or whatever without really thinking about, does this add value to my life. And that was another question that was really important to me, is does this add value to my life. And what I mean by that is, does this thing that I'm going to consume or this thing I'm going to hold on to, is it serving a purpose or is it bringing me joy, and if not I have to be willing to let go of it so that I can make room for what is going to serve a purpose or bring me joy.

And I think that's different for each of us, Tom. The things that add value to your life and to your family's life may not necessarily add value to mine and vice versa. And so we have to keep asking that question, because even the things that add value to my life today at age 35 may not add value at age 40 or 45, and so it's a constant journey. You're always working towards that horizon, but of course once you get to the horizon there's a new horizon.

**WOODS:** I'm happy to say that, although my girls I would not describe as minimalists, nevertheless they are far, far less obsessed with material things than I was when I was their age. When it comes to Christmas gifts or whatever, they're quite content with just basic things. And I want to shower them with gifts; I want to give them everything there is, but they honestly don't want that. I have a 13-year-old who for her last birthday, she insisted she genuinely did not want gifts. She wanted the money that would have been spent on gifts to be donated to the animal shelter where she volunteered. And so she wound up doing a Go Fund Me campaign, and she wound up raising \$500 for the local animal shelter. That gave her more pleasure than all the trinkets in the world would have given her.

**MILLBURN:** There's an apothem that ends up being true: giving is living. And I think that I was really able to understand that it's meaningful to contribute beyond myself, to contribute to a community or to charities. There's a great website called GiveWell.org who ranks different charities based on their effectiveness. And what I've

learned is that that's one of my core values now, and even though I was making really good money in the corporate world, I wasn't giving as much as I could have been giving because I was constantly pursuing something else for myself, and I had to let go of that idea of success, that identity that I had so that I could figure out how can I contribute to other people and will I find that meaningful. And ultimately, yes, I feel like the more that we give, the more we grow, and then of course the more that we grow the more that we have to give.

But you mentioned your daughters and how maybe there's a generational shift as well. And I think that right now we are shifting from a culture of ownership to a culture of access. Now, I don't mean that in the sort of socialist perspective, where we're all having to share things, but we get to share in many instances, or we just get access to things where we don't have to hold the physical artifact anymore. And I think technology is the best example of this. It used to be that I had to have 1,000 DVDs if I wanted an extensive movie collection, but now you can go online and whether it's Netflix or Hulu or iTunes or whatever, and you have access to basically a functionally infinite amount of movie titles. And the same is true with music. And of course when it comes to the supposed sharing economy – I would just call it the access economy – whether it's Uber or all of these apps on our phones that give us access to goods and services that we wouldn't otherwise be able to possess if we didn't have the money for those things.

**WOODS:** You'd be very interested in a book called Kevin Kelly called *The Inevitable*, and the subtitle is something like *12 Technological Transformations That Are Going to Change Our Lives*, or whatever. But the book is called *The Inevitable*, and he has a chapter in which he says that, given exactly what you're talking about, it's possible that that kind of model will spread to more and more things that we do such that the number of things you would actually have to own physically could drop substantially. Maybe you use something for a little while, and then somebody else uses it or whatever, even physical things, even a car ride. You don't need to have your own car. There are all these possibilities, and I think people assumed that as technology developed and as civilization moved forward there would always be more and more and more and more stuff produced that we would have to have, but this digital revolution, as you say, makes possible a command over things that is astonishing in its scope. I can have access to almost any book ever published in one way or another, and yet I don't have to have a single thing on my shelf.

**MILLBURN:** Yeah, but also realizing that we don't have to go that route. We have the free will to have an entire bookshelf full of physical books if that's what we really find value in, but also we no longer have to be burdened by that if we don't want to be. And yeah, I'm a big fan of Kevin Kelly, and I agree with what you're saying there,. And also, while I was on tour while we were filming the documentary, one of the stops was in Albuquerque, and this guy came up to me afterward, and he said, you know, I need a chainsaw about once every two years, and so whenever I need a chainsaw I go get it from my storage locker. It just happens to be that my storage locker is Craigslist. And so I'll go on there, and I'll pay \$25 to get a chainsaw, and then once I'm done with it I'll put it back in my storage locker, give it to someone else who can actually find value in it. And so what I find meaningful in that is realizing that, while that process in and of itself might be a bit cumbersome to do that, eventually there will be an Uber for

chainsaws, and the technology will allow us to have access to more of those things and share them if that's what we're inclined to do.

**WOODS:** I want to say one thing about – I mean, we thoroughly enjoyed watching *The Minimalists*. We thoroughly enjoyed it, the kids and I, and I'm talking about this is something we watched on a Friday night. Friday night, kids are expecting something other than a documentary called *The Minimalists*, but I put it on and I said I think this will be useful for us to watch. And they agreed that it was useful. They were glad that we watched it, and I'm going to make them listen to this episode too next time we're driving around in the car. But one thing I didn't like – I'll just be honest with you; this may just be a prejudice of mine. But I don't like Sam Harris at all.

**MILLBURN:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** And I thought he came off as the smug philosopher type, that, you know, everybody leads such meaningless lives; if only they'd listen to people like me they'd get some meaning back in their lives. And I didn't detect any of that in anything you said or anything Ryan said. There was none of that holier-than-thou arrogance, but I felt like that came through a bit in Sam Harris.

**MILLBURN:** I think we wanted to capture a bunch of different perspectives in this, so we had someone like Sam Harris, who is actually a very well known atheist, but then we also had someone like Joshua Becker, who is a pastor and has a family out in the suburbs of Phoenix, and tried to provide these different perspectives. And it's funny you say that, because quite often after we would do screenings when this thing was in theaters – We did a pretty big theatrical release this summer of the film. And people would come up afterwards, and they'd say, you know, I absolutely love that Sam Harris was in here; it really resonated with me. And then two people later would say, Why did you put Sam Harris in the documentary?

And it was interesting, because what we tried to do was find a way to make minimalism a bit more accessible, to show people that minimalism isn't a radical lifestyle; it is a practical lifestyle, and I found the best way to do that was to share all these other recipes, because for the last six years over at [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com), Ryan and I have shared our story, and it's been the Joshua and Ryan show, whether it's on our blog or *The Minimalists* podcast or any of our books. We've written three books together. And that's been great. We've been able to share our perspective and our recipe, but we wanted to go out and tweeze ingredients from other people's recipes, not in hopes to proselytize or try to convert anyone to minimalism. You know, I don't think you can do that. I don't have the ability to baptize anyone in minimalism. Really what I want to do is share a bunch of different recipes in hopes that you can tweeze out a few ingredients and sort of create your own recipe for more intentional, simpler living.

It doesn't mean that you yourself have to be a minimalist, but what I hope is that you can grab a nugget or two and say, ah, this will really help me simplify my life, so I can start focusing on maybe my health. For me that was a benefit I uncovered. I used to weight 80 pounds more than I weigh now, Tom, and I was just unhealthy. I forsook the people closest to me, so I regained control of my relationships. I wasn't really focusing on what I was passionate about, because I was so focused on this daily rat race, and I

really wasn't focused on growth or contribution, and these were the values I uncovered. And what we wanted to do was show people these different perspectives, help them uncover what their values were as well.

**WOODS:** All right, I want to talk to you about libertarianism too, but first let's thank our sponsor.

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All right, I said I wanted to talk about libertarianism, but before I do that I want to ask you about the tiny house movement, which obviously you can see how it would be related to minimalism, although I could imagine somebody having a more conventional house and being a minimalist. And I had a guy named Jay Shafer all the way back on Episode 215. This one is 775. And I learned something about the tiny house movement. That is just definitely not for me. That would really not make me happy, and that was the part of the documentary actually that my girls were looking at me like, Dad, are you getting any ideas here, because this would be – We have five kids, and I know you had somebody with six kids, which again, startled them. But talk about the tiny house movement for a minute.

**MILLBURN:** I don't want to live in a tiny house at all, so I'll just put that out there right away.

**WOODS:** Oh, that's interesting. Okay, all right.

**MILLBURN:** I really admire the people who want to live that and move down that route, and also I think it's a great way for people who are interested in owning their home outright, and it's a very affordable way to do that, especially if you don't have kids. Some of the people we interviewed in the documentary – There was Tammy Strobel and her husband Logan, they own a tiny house out in Northern California, but it's just the two of them, and it's a really tiny house, and it's really well done, and it's gorgeous. It's intentional, and it has to be intentional, right? You have to – 188 square feet, you have to plan every square foot of that thing. But then I also had someone in the documentary named Graham Hill, and he has this really awesome 420-square foot apartment. You'll probably remember this, because it sleeps seven people, has a movie theater in it, has a dining room table that seats 12 people, has an office area, all in this 420 square feet, because the whole thing's modular. And again, I really admire that, but I also don't want to live in New York City personally, and that type of house is conducive to living in New York, for sure.

But for me, what I realized is that using these spaces, however you are deciding to live your life, you want to have a home that you're able to fit your life into or build a home around your life, as opposed to trying to cram a life into a house. I remember once upon a time I had two living rooms at one point, and one of them I didn't use at all. It didn't make any sense for me. Or when Ryan was going through his journey – Ryan and I have been best friends since we were fifth graders, and so he's the guy who runs [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com) with me. He lived in this 2,000-square foot condo all by himself, and it had two living rooms, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a two-car garage, and you realize that there's a lot of wasted space there.

For me now I live in Missoula, Montana; it's me and my partner and a three-year-old, and so we have this family who lives in a three-bedroom house. We have an office there, and that is a space that's appropriate for me. And so when I think about living spaces, the word "appropriate" tends to come up a lot, is what is appropriate for my lifestyle, at this point in my life, as well, because often people will downsize once their kids leave the house, and they'll move into a community that's more in line with their current interests and desires. So ultimately, the question with living intentionally, especially when it comes to a home, is what's appropriate for my lifestyle.

We interviewed an architect, the minimalist architect in the film; his name is Frank. And he said whenever he builds a house for someone, he doesn't ask, Do you want a living room? Or, do you want a dining room? Or, Do you want whatever? Because most people say yes, because we've been told this is the template we're supposed to live in. Instead he asks, How do you live your life? And he tries to build a house around their life. And I think we can all do that in some form to get more use out of the space that we actually have.

**WOODS:** I'm actually having a house built and having it designed and everything, and it really is specifically the exact house I need. There is no existing house that's exactly what I need; I want to have an office that's soundproof – I mean, I have a lot of peculiar needs, and they're going to be met, and it won't be a tiny house, but it'll be comfortable and it'll be the Woods' house, the house that makes sense for the Woods family.

Now, I want to – Geez, there are so many things I want to ask you here. I want to ask you about going on the road with all this stuff; I want to ask you about libertarianism. Yeah, let's talk about that for a minute. You describe yourself as a libertarian, and you know, I run into a lot of people who say they're libertarians or people who talk about libertarianism who think libertarianism means greed and just getting as much stuff as you possibly can and that that's what we're all about because we believe in the free market. But what we're really all about is individual choices.

**MILLBURN:** Agency, really, right?

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's what it is. Whether you make a good choice or a bad choice, the choice is yours. That's the point. Our philosophy doesn't dictate to you the content of your choices, just your right to make them. So do you see a connection between that kind of political view of yours and your lifestyle as a minimalist?

**MILLBURN:** I do personally, yes, because I want to have agency over my own life, but I also want to be intentional with the decisions that I make. For the longest time I followed a template. I went down this path of supposed success, but my priorities were out of line. Like I said earlier, I forsook the people closest to me, not because I didn't love them or care about them, but because I was so busy working 80 hours a week, allocating all of my time to networking buddies and executives and people in the office next door. And it's not that those were bad people; it's just quite often they didn't share similar values to me, and that meant that by the end of the day I didn't have enough time to spend with the people closest to me. It's the reason my marriage ended; it's the reason a lot of my friendships were in shambles, was because I didn't

treat the people – I sort of made them a lip service priority, in a way. I said, yes, this is my priority or my health is my priority or writing is a priority. But I think our real priorities are how we spend our time each day, and I want to be able to make the best decisions with those 24 hours.

We don't all have the same resources, and I think that's okay, that there's this inherent inequality in the world. I grew up really poor. I was on welfare and food stamps growing up, and there was a lot of alcoholism and drug abuse in the household. And what I realized through this whole process was – Well, first I thought that money was the reason, the lack of money was the reason we were discontented. And no, the reason we were discontented was because of repeated poor decisions, and when I started to get money throughout my 20s, as I climbed the corporate money, I continued to make poor decisions with that money, and it just amplified the amount of bad decisions I was able to make. And that's what led to over six figures worth of debt, and it led to a lot more discontent in my life. And so I had to change the decisions I was making, and to do that I had to start looking inward. But before I could do that, I had to get rid of the sort of external clutter in my life. I think those material possessions, that material clutter is just a reflection of – it's this physical manifestation of really what's going on inside, and by clearing that I was able to become a bit more aware of what my internal clutter was as well.

**WOODS:** I myself was a crazy workaholic for a long time, to the point that I resented going on vacation. Like, I was just brooding and miserable when I was on vacation, because I should be home working. And I have so changed that that now, not only do I thoroughly enjoy and very much look forward to my vacations, but I think the thing that I spend most of my money on is vacations, actually. It's not on things that I can say, Look, I have this, I have that, I have this – It's that I want those experiences. That's what I want to buy. I want to be able to go places; I want to make some memories with the kids. And that's what's really – So even though I wouldn't say I'm a minimalist, when I stopped to think about it before having you on, I thought, well, what kind of things do I buy? I buy food. Occasionally I buy some clothes. When there's new music that comes out that I like, I buy that. But it's not like every day I think, I've got to go to Macy's and get 15 things, or the new such and such phone is out; I have to have that. I guess I'm just not that way. So oddly enough, in a weird way maybe I am at least a fellow traveler.

**MILLBURN:** Yeah, I think so. I think we share the same values. And so I think the word "minimalism" is exactly the right word to use and exactly the wrong word to use when we talk about this. Minimalism, when you hear it you think radical or stark or overly simplistic. But really that word draws people in, and they want to hear more about it. And you realize that, okay, there are different flavors or minimalism. If you want to own 15 items and not have any possessions in the world, that's okay. Minimalism will allow you to do that. But it'll also allow you to question what is important in your life and begin to focus on that, as opposed to focusing on –

Well, really, the stuff becomes a veneer or some sort of facade, because we buy these things to try to cover up the discontent or the anxiety that we experience, especially for someone like me and you who are both recovering workaholics. I was literally working 70 to 80 hours a week managing a bunch of those retail stores. In fact, I worked 362 days a year, and where I worked, the culture, they actually frowned on

you if you took vacation time. You were considered a slacker or lazy if you did that. So I didn't have the experiences I wanted to experience, and now I am much more focused on giving to others, but also growing, and I think the best way to grow is through these various experiences that sometimes are even uncomfortable. You put yourself in a new situation that's slightly uncomfortable, but that place of discomfort is the place from which we grow the most.

**WOODS:** You took this message on the road, and part of *The Minimalists* shows you and Ryan taking this on the road. That really interests me, because you both felt like you had discovered an insight, a truth that needed to be shared with other people, but you had no way of knowing if anybody wanted to hear it, or even if they did, if they could find out about what you were doing and come out to hear you. So you were really taking a step into the dark when you did that. Talk about that.

**MILLBURN:** It was a lot of fun. We basically hit the road without many expectations, and we went to just different bookstores. Ryan and I wrote a book called *Everything That Remains*. It's a memoir about the five years of our life from the suit-and-tie corporate guys to becoming minimalists and eventually "the Minimalists," and we just took that on the road. And as you said, often we'd show up at an event, and two people would be there, but then as the message spread and it got picked up by media and we had a TEDx talk that went viral, and we had a lot of stuff that got picked up online, all of a sudden two people turned into 20, and 20 turned into 200, and we had one event where 1,400 people showed up toward the end of that tour.

And what I realized is that adding value is a basic human instinct, and that's why the message really spread. Someone was finding value in it. And Tom, I know you'll do this as well: if you find a book or an article or a podcast that you really find value in, your first inclination is to share that with people you care about, whether that's through social media or emailing to a friend or family member, saying, I found value in this; I think you'll find value in it too. And that's what we learned, is that we have this basic human need to want to add value to other people's lives. And so you talk about your daughter wanting to contribute for the holidays as opposed to receiving another trinket. I think that's because we want to add value beyond ourselves, and that's what this message was, was how do we get out here and add value to other people's lives, not in a way that is preaching, not in a way trying to tell people that you have to get rid of your stuff, but hey, maybe this might work for you too.

**WOODS:** All right, people should want to watch this. Now, you've also written books, and you've got a website, [JoshuaFieldsMillburn.com](http://JoshuaFieldsMillburn.com). I'm going to link to that at [TomWoods.com/775](http://TomWoods.com/775). Also [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com) – is that the name of the website, [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com)?

**MILLBURN:** Yeah, I think that's probably the best place to go. Just go to [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com). You can find – if you want any of our books – there; you can find the documentary, which is called *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*. You can find that there as well. We also have over 500 essays there. It's all free. You can find our TEDx talk, some interviews we've done, our podcast as well, all over there at [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com).

**WOODS:** How often do you release a podcast episode?

**MILLBURN:** Well, we just took a break recently. We're coming back in November, but we tend to do one a week, and we do it on different topics, so it might be on gift giving one week – And what we do is we take calls from our audience, and then we answer their questions, so it's more of a traditional call-in kind of show but for the podcast world.

**WOODS:** Wow, okay, that's great. I bet you could come up with a lot of interesting topics related to minimalism. That's nice. And especially – right, you get input from people who listen. Well, this is tremendous. Did you think that you'd have this kind of success? I mean, at the beginning it was not so auspicious.

**MILLBURN:** No, Tom, my initial plan when all of this started was – I eventually left the corporate world once I paid off all my debt – not that there's anything wrong with working a 9-to-5. I think we all have to pay the bills. But for me, what I was doing no longer aligned with the person I wanted to become, and so I walked away from that six-figure world, and my initial plan was to work at a coffee shop two blocks from my house and write fiction full time. I always wanted to write fiction. And this whole nonfiction route has been a really beautiful accident, but I feel really fortunate and grateful that I'm able to contribute in this way, which was totally unintentional.

**WOODS:** Well, it's tremendous. So [TheMinimalists.com](http://TheMinimalists.com) is where I'm going to urge people to go. When you approached me with this, my response was, well, I can't say I'm too sympathetic to what you're doing, but you know, I'll take a look at it (laughing). It was a real jerk response. And then I watched it and I thought, oh, now I feel bad. He's a great guy. Why did I give him that grouchy answer? So anyway, I hope people will have the same experience I did. Thanks a lot, Joshua; best of luck.

**MILLBURN:** Thanks, Tom; appreciate you.