



*Essentialism:
The Disciplines Pursuit of Less*

GREG MCKEOWN

WITH BILL BLANKSCHAEN

thrive[↑]
A Zislar family Community



interview transcript

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Bill Blankschaen:

Welcome to *Thrive*, our Ziglar Family Community Family Focus Expert Interview.

This month we have someone very special, someone who has affected my life. As you know, I'm a father of six kids. This is a guy who wrote a book that dramatically impacted my life just last year. I thought, first of all, if you're a parent and you feel overwhelmed, if you feel stretched too thin, you feel overcommitted — what parent doesn't feel that way? You are in for a treat.

Don't go anywhere, because we have with us Greg McKeown, author of the book *Essentialism*. I love the scribble effect. What family doesn't have those pictures all over the place? You're going to love this interview. I want to welcome Greg McKeown to Ziglar Family. So great to have you here.

Greg McKeown:

It's so nice to be with you, and so nice to be with everyone.

Bill Blankschaen:

Thank you. Greg is the author of *Essentialism*. I could go into his bio. Greg, it's impressive. You've worked with companies like Apple, Google, Facebook, you blog at *Harvard Business Review*, Stanford degrees, you're a *New York Times* bestselling author. We could go on and on. To me, one of the most important things is that you're also a dad, and so you know what it's like to feel overwhelmed as a dad trying to do a lot and the family dynamic. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to write this book, *Essentialism*? Where did that come from?

Greg McKeown:

Reading that description, this is for any parent who feels stretched too thin at home, or at work, or both, and so on, as you were reading it I thought, that sounds awfully familiar to me because I had this dual experience that brought together a single insight.

The dual experience was working with Silicon Valley companies, as you mentioned, and noticing a predictable pattern there, which is that when they're focused on the essential things, it led to success, but that success can breed so many options and opportunities that it can lead to what Jim Collins has called the undisciplined pursuit of more, which can pull people into the non-essential, and therefore take them



away from the things that led to success in the first place. This is a strategic insight that is a really repeatable process source a lot of times, simple but quite an important insight.

At the same time as I'm observing this, I'm also suddenly noticing that this is true in my life, not just as a strategic insight for these companies. It came to a head once when I received an email from my boss at the time. He said, "Look, Friday would be a very bad time for your wife to have a baby because I'd like you to be at this client meeting." I'm sure that at least in part that was in jest, but somehow I was feeling very pulled between all of this. I was definitely trying to keep everybody happy.

Friday morning, we're still in the hospital, our daughter has been born, and we're there. To my shame, I go to the meeting. After the meeting, my boss said, "Well, look, the client will respect you for the choice you just made." Even if they did, which I'm not sure they did, I recognized in hindsight having made a fool's bargain and learned the simplest of lessons, which is if you don't prioritize your life, someone else will. That really was a genesis moment for writing *Essentialism*, which is about the antidote to this problem. The antidote to the undisciplined pursuit of more is the disciplined pursuit of less but better.

Bill Blankschaen:

Yes. I love it. I love that you share that story in your book. It's so compelling. You're so authentic in the book and open about your struggles. That's another reason. By the way, parents, if you're listening to this, right below this video you're going to find a link to click to get the book. You simply must get the book. I'm going to keep reminding you, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. I have worn out my copy. You must have it. Get it on audio, whatever you need. Let's delve into this because-

Greg McKeown:

Actually, just pause there for a second.

Bill Blankschaen:

Yeah.

Greg McKeown:

I want to pause for a second because, first of all, thank you for that. That was very nice of you to say these things. I want to add that I am still in that struggle, that although there have been, I would say, layers of improvement, meaning cumulative benefit from wrestling with essentialism and trying to apply both the principles and the practices of essentialism, I feel in it still. I feel like half a revolutionary, if I can describe it that way, that there's another half of the work to go. I don't feel like I'm on top of the mountain, and here's how the answers go, and it's all resolved. No, but I think now, and I didn't know this really at the time of writing the book and didn't write it in there, that there really are two kinds of people in the world, two kinds of parent. There's the parent who is lost, and then there is the parent who knows they are lost.



Bill Blankschaen:

Yes.

Greg McKeown:

I just believe that it's important to try and get into that second category because then paradoxically you actually start to know what to do, which is you have got to figure out your way. You've got to figure out which path you ought to be going in. Anyway, I just wanted to make sure. This isn't a past thing, it's all resolved now. I feel in the wrestle.

Bill Blankschaen:

We don't have to bring your wife in to document the fact that you're still wrestling with this, right? That's good.

Greg McKeown:

No, no, exactly. I don't want to pretend with this. This is hard. I think to figure out what's essential, eliminate what's not, and to build a system around those things that matter most, this isn't, okay, you just do it, and then you arrive, and then you're done. This is the work of life. That's why the language is so important of the disciplined pursuit. This is something you've got to keep going with, you've got to keep caring about. I think there is much more value in the long-term journey than thinking of it as just a theme of the week, a theme of the month, oh, that was interesting, on to the next thing. At least that's been true for me.

Bill Blankschaen:

That is so good. Zig Ziglar, as you probably know, talked a lot about choosing to respond instead of reacting to life. That seems to be so much of what you're talking about. Even this morning as I was reviewing the book in preparation for our conversation, it reminded me to put first things first. I grabbed my 11 year-old, took him out to breakfast this morning and spent some time with him trying to be intentional. You talk in your book about how no one can take the ability to choose away from us, that we forget the ability to choose. I think how many parents forget that they actually have a choice in how they're going about their life. Let's say they feel lost, but they don't know it yet. Talk to us a little bit if you can about that learned helplessness that you talk about in the book. These parents that are either lost or let's say they don't know they're lost, they're probably in this sense of learned helplessness. What can they do? What is that all about?

Greg McKeown:

First of all, just this idea of learned helplessness basically has two types to it. One type is what is typically thought of in the literature about learned helplessness, which is that you stop acting. You don't stop caring, but you act as if you do because what's the point? Nothing I do makes any difference. I observed a second type of learned helplessness which is where somebody is so reactive and that life has become so perpetually so reactive, they just keep on going. It's an activity. There's nothing I can do about this. Life is



wild, wild is crazy. Everything is going in every direction all the time. That is how it is, that's so normalized that we don't even think we're making a choice. This is what you do. This is how it has to be done. In fact, it is so has to be done, we wouldn't even say that. That is it. That's how it is. It's hidden in plain sight.

I do think that the first thing you do to create a responsive approach to life is to shine a light on non-essentialism, which is another name for the enemy of our story. Non-essentialism is a way of thinking. It says, "Look, you have to do everything popular now." Everything popular now is the mantra of non-essentialism. By looking at that, by naming it, by observing it, you are already creating space from it. Until you name it, until you say there is such a thing as non-essentialism and we are swimming in that reality, you can't get out of the pool. You can't make a different choice.

Bill Blankschaen:

Parents who maybe as they're listening to you realizing, "Okay, wait a minute, maybe I'm in this current. Maybe I am lost," and they're just coming to understand that, you do have a great section about setting boundaries, and in fact talk about the freedom that comes from setting boundaries, I think both for parents and setting boundaries for kids, and that all important word, saying no. You do a great job. Tell us about the power that comes from learning that you can set boundaries in life.

Greg McKeown:

Yes, and let me do that with some context first. There are three principles to apply essentialism. The first is to create space to figure out what is essential to you; the second, to then eliminate what is not; and the third, to build a system that supports, makes it as effortless as possible to execute those essential things. If you think about boundaries in this way, there's a great story that I came across in the research book of a therapist who is sitting down with parents of a wayward son. They say, "Look, he's not here today, but we're here. We can see there's such a problem. He's taking drugs. He's not working. He's not being productive. He lives at home with us here." They said, "Well, why isn't he here?" "Well, he's not here because he doesn't think he has a problem." The therapist said, "Well, I think your son might be right." They said, "Okay, well I think we've got the wrong therapist here. What's going on?"

He says, "No, listen," he said, "If your neighbor looks out of the window in the morning and sees just green, lush grass in their yard, and the reason that it's so green and nice is because your sprinklers are misaligned and they are spraying on his grass every morning, then your neighbor does not have a problem. You have a problem. Everything's fine for your neighbor. You have the problem." He says, "The bottom line, you've got to help him to have a problem. You've got to realign your own sprinklers so that he has a problem." They said, "That's your son right now is that there's no boundaries. Over time, in the name of being helpful, in the name of being kind, you're doing something that's actually not very kind. It feels in the moment like it is, but underneath it you can admit you're just not actually addressing the problem. You're hiding behind being nice. You're hiding behind being kind." Really, and I can push this now further, love is something much greater and much more demanding than niceness.



That's the higher idea here is that we have to build in ... If we say it's essential to raise children who can contribute at their highest level to society, to their own families, to God, then how do we achieve that? One way we achieve that is by building, the boundaries is the right word but I want to make sure it's richly understood. It's really mutually beneficial understanding, agreement, so that people know what's expected of them, and we know exactly what the results of that will be, and we put together, the term I use in the book for this is a social contract. It's a written document, and it is well-developed, and it's clearly understood. Everybody signs it, actually signs it. This is the idea of boundaries that I'm talking about. It's wisely designed, carefully thought out so that then the execution in life with that teenager, with that person in your life is much more understood. We've already thought through this. We can look to the agreement to guide the behavior over time, not just to whatever the capricious whims of the moment are.

Bill Blankschaen:

That was wonderful. If I can punctuate with a quote from your book, don't rob people of their problems. In this setting, I would say don't rob your kids of their problems. Part of being a parent is not protecting them from problems, it's coming alongside and walking with them through those so that they can emerge on the other side. I just love that expression, don't rob people of their problems. That was so good.

Greg McKeown:

Thank you.

Bill Blankschaen:

In that context then, let's talk about another thing that you deal with. Again, all this is in the same continuum. If there are parents thinking it feels like what you're saying is you have to make some tough choices as parents, all of us have to make choices in life, you talk about the reality of trade-offs in your book and how blowing up the myth of you can have it all. I think how many families right now are spread so thin trying to do everything, and imagine the clarity they could get by figuring out what they should be doing and prioritizing it, and in fact stop doing some things. In fact, you had a great story in there about instead of doing more, removing more, a story with your wife that you told in your book during your graduate school days. What would you say to parents and families in that place if they're thinking, "Now, I think I can do it all," and they're just spread so thin? What would you say to them?

Greg McKeown:

Look, the first thing I think to do is to lean into non-essentialism a moment. If somebody finds themselves saying, "Look, I think I can do it all," well, good. If it's working for you, if non-essentialism is working for you, go for it. If the mantra or something akin to it of everything popular now is working, don't listen to me. In fact, double down on it. Just go all the way with it. If the promise is true, then it will work well for you. If in fact you can just do it all and then end up getting it all, then you've found yourself a winning strategy, and I'm wrong, and that's fine. On the basis that going all the way with that strategy is in fact unhealthy, or harmful, or unsustainable, or actually joyful, or unsatisfying, or in fact leads to an unsuccessful life, then consider a different strategy.



Consider strategy because non-essentialism, it pretends to be a strategy, meaning that it pretends that what you want is Y, and what you have to do is X to get it. Strategy, for it to be real, must be based in correct assumptions. It must be based in reality. It must be true. What I'm arguing for is that we live in a world not made by me, not made by you, not made by any of us, that simply inherently has trade-offs. Those trade-offs can either be made reactively so that we don't really know which trade-offs we're making because we're just trying to do it all, and somehow in the mix of life some things just don't get done, a ton of stuff just doesn't get done, or we make those trade-offs up front so that we say, "Which are the things that are truly essential? What am I going to go big on? Where am I going to put the investment?" That becomes the essence of all strategies, which trade-offs am I going to make. There isn't strategy if there isn't trade-off. This is really what I'm arguing for, what I'm articulating.

Bill Blankschaen:

I love that. It's all about being intentional, which is something that we talk about a lot as families and parents, the value of being intentional. One of the intentional things that you encourage people to do, you talk about something called buffer in your book and the fact that having buffer gives you an unfair advantage. A term families might use more or I think a similar term is margin in life, having that margin. I know reality is I've got six kids, every family listening knows there are times when it feels like you blew right past the margin. Maybe somebody listening right now is thinking, "I can't even think of margin." Talk to us about how being intentional can help create some of that and some of the insights that you've gleaned about having that buffer that could be helpful to families who are feeling that way.

Greg McKeown:

This idea of having no buffer, let's just go to that for a second, if there's no buffer, what's that like? You're saying somebody listening right now, "Oh, margin, buffer, I've got nothing. I've got none of this in my life." What's that like? How is that working for us? Again, if it's working, keep doing it because that's what the non-essentialist mantra would say. When you have two options, when you have two different commitments, two different invitations, just say yes to them both and scramble and figure it out. The answer to every problem isn't to make a trade-off, it's to do both.

I think I know something of what that will look like. In fact, I got an email from somebody just recently, the wife of a surgeon, so husband, father, who was so overscheduled, so overworked, spending so little time with family, so little time on just even basic health for himself, that he had started getting some sort of what they determined was a stress rash on his hands and was making it so that it was becoming difficult to perform the surgery itself. This was finally discombobulating the very asset through which he could make any contribution. Right in the midst of this, they were on a long car journey and listened to the whole of Essentialism, and made a new plan, a new path. They removed all sorts of extra commitments and extracurricular items from their life. Suddenly, the stress is much more manageable, it's back to a normal healthy level, condition disappears.



She said that then when this was all stabilized, one of the partners in the practice left with two weeks notice. Suddenly, all of these key clients were put on her husband's plate. She said if they hadn't created the buffer, the way she summarized it she said, "I think that Essentialism wasn't just life changing, it was life saving," for her husband. That's what she believed. She believed that if that much stress had suddenly been added on, it would've actually been the end of it. That would've been the end.

That's an extreme version of the problem and the solution, but I think that most people listening to this understand what it's like when you just keep pushing, and your answer to your stress is to just push harder and to add another thing, and that somehow if we do enough, we'll feel somehow successful enough that we'll then feel satisfied. We live in an age of FOMO, which is the acronym for the fear of missing out. What we need to discover is JOMO, or the joy of missing out, and discover that there is power, that there is value, that there is enjoyment in not doing a thing.

In fact, I'm just going to give you one more example about this from my family that just comes to mind. We had signed up through a funny backstory that one of our friends would take our son to baseball for the whole season. Basically, he'd lost a bet, a very friendly bet. Anyway, he suddenly was to do this. As we got to the moment of signing up for this, we realized even if he takes him every time, we still have a huge additional element of our life to have our son go. Then we thought, "He'll want to go to baseball. He loves sports." We're grappling back and forth what to do, trying to figure out the right trade-off. Finally as we're thinking about it, we say, "Well, listen, why don't we bring him in?" We bring in my son, comes in, and we ask him. We start putting it to him. "Okay, what's your thoughts on this?" He said, "Oh, no big deal. I don't mind if I don't do it at all," just like that, and that fast. There wasn't even a discussion. There wasn't disappointment. There wasn't a concern. He says, "Oh, that's no big deal."

This is a whole season of stress that was removed, and suddenly buffer restored. This is the kind of moment where you say, "Look, just because other people are doing it," just because you think we ought to do it because someone's doing it, if we were better, we could fit it all in because other people seem to fit it," it's a game we don't have to play. We can play the margin game. We can play the buffer game. You still make a contribution, you still work hard, but you don't have to try and do it all.

Bill Blankschaen:

Wow, I can give a hearty amen to that because, as I told you, I've been dramatically affected by this message. I'm going to give you a brief story. I want to set you up for talking about some practical ways that families can implement this. After reading your book last fall, I had a client in our company who if I gave the name, everybody would recognize the name. It was a significant relationship, and so I really wanted to come through for them. They asked the impossible in compressed amount of time that I thought there's no way. I would have to jump through hoops, and I would have had to have set my family aside, all our other priorities. I wrestled with it, and thanks to you, Essentialism (everybody, get the book!) thanks to you and your book, I had the courage and the clarity to say, "I love you, but that's not going to happen. It's not realistic."



The end result was they came back and said, “First of all, we respect your integrity. We respect your commitment to being honest with us about that. Oh, by the way, because you said that, we realized our expectations were unrealistic, not just on you, on everybody on the project.” Everybody else was saying, “Yes, we can do it. We’ll figure it out.” I share that just to empower parents and families to realize saying no, all those things you’re afraid of, like you said, you were wrestling with that with your son, and it wasn’t even an issue. It wasn’t even something to be feared in the process. There is hope in applying this to your life.

Greg McKeown:

Yeah, and let’s just riff on that for a moment because I think that what I want to emphasize, especially now even more than in the book, is just creating tiny, tiny pause. I’m not arguing— and nor did I in the book — but I don’t want it to be misunderstood because I think it occasionally it can be, that somehow I’m advocating saying no to everyone and everything without thinking about it. That would be a different book. That would be a book called No-ism, and I wrote a book called *Essentialism*. The difference is really different. This is about the things that really matter most so that you’re saying yes to those things, and therefore having conversations about the other things that come along.

I just think when you have a new idea, opportunity, invitation, whether from someone else as is often the case or what I believe is even more the case, from ourselves, we just have an idea that we generate, you just pause just a moment. If you’re not used to pausing, you pause one second, two seconds, or three seconds. When the email comes in, you don’t just respond back. You just pause. You still ought to respond, but take a few seconds. Take a moment. In the pause, you’ll find you can consider something.

One of the ways recently that I’ve discovered for creating pause is just to ask a question. When somebody says, “Hey, listen, could you do this thing?” instead of inside going, “Could I possibly do that thing? Could that possibly be good?” which seems to be the general gist of these moments, “Oh, yes, okay. Sure, I’ll do that,” you just ask almost any question at all. “Oh, wow, that sounds interesting. Tell me more about it. Oh, what have you been doing in the past?” As soon as you’ve asked the question, get ready to ask another question. Get a chance to just allow conversation to take place.

Bill Blankschaen:

That’s good.

Greg McKeown:

I just failed on this myself in the last 24 hours. A text request came in, and there’s four of us on the text. I was so eager to show myself as helpful, a team player in this newly formed group, I just responded, “Oh, for sure. Yeah, no problem. I’m in.” Then the other responses came in, one of them, “Well, okay, fine.” Another person said, “Well, you know, we could do that, but maybe we should wait for this situation. That seems like that would be less disruptive.” Then I just watched this exchange evolve until eventually



the leader who had asked for this in the first place said, “Well, listen, I pushed back on the person I was reporting to, and they’ve actually suggested that we do the later event. I think that’s because we sort of were a little slower in our response that that was the outcome.” I thought, here I am trying to be a good player, a good team player, but actually maybe I was just being reactive. Yes, I wanted to demonstrate my team player-ness, but I was simply reacting instead of just pausing. Is this the right way forward? What are we trying to accomplish? Let’s just not let the most reactive person, wherever they are in seniority in the organization, let’s not let the most reactive person call the shots.

Bill Blankschaen:

Yes. Yeah, that is so good, and it’s so powerful. It’s one of those things that doesn’t seem powerful on the surface, but Stephen Covey used to talk about that, about the power in that space between action and reaction, or response.

Greg McKeown:

Between stimulus and response, yes.

Bill Blankschaen:

Stimulus and response, that’s what it was, yep, and Zig’s talked a lot about that. Let’s bring this in for a landing here if we can. I suspect we’re talking about something that’s dear to you. I could talk about this for hours, but families have other things to do, so let’s bring it into focus. Zig used to quote his friend Joe Sabah many times who said, “You don’t have to be great to start, but you do have to start to be great.” You talk about the power of taking small steps. Zig used to talk about the power of termites. They take small bites, but they do more damage than most catastrophes. What can parents do and families do to start taking small steps? To me, the first step is go get your book. After they’ve done that, how do they go about this? How do they get this started to put this in motion?

Greg McKeown:

I think that if you’re going to do one thing, you should go and schedule a personal quarterly offsite. You could extend that potentially to a family quarterly offsite, but I actually think I would still say begin with personal. Just create space. You have to create it now. It used to be that you could be bored, and space would create itself. It would act upon you. Now it doesn’t because the moment someone’s bored, they’re just on their phone. The moment somebody would otherwise have been bored, or picked up a book to read, or to think, or to pause, think about the future, you’re just reacting incessantly to the now. We have to steal that time back. We have to take that resource back, and I think taking 1 day every 90 days is one way to do it.

Then simply this is the strategy for those offsites is that you go to a place that’s away, somewhere quiet, somewhere without a phone, and you are reflecting on what’s gone right over the last 90 days and why does that matter to me. Make a list of the top few things that just come to mind about things that are going right, especially here in our family. What’s going right, and why do each of those things matter? You write that down. Then in each of those areas, you start to say, “Well, what would the next level look



like, and what are just a few things that would be breakthrough at the next level?” You come out of that offsite with just two or three very key things that you say, “Okay, over the next 90 days, I’m going to go after them.” Honestly for me, I don’t feel very satisfied unless I’ve broken this down to a single priority in my life which is on the family side, and then a single priority in my professional life. Those things need to be aligned so that they work together so that they aren’t at odds. If you just start there, this is great.

If somebody wants to go further, which I think ultimately they will, don’t worry so much about the to-do list each day. What I think is a carefully curated checklist where you’ve identified, “Okay, if this is my essential intent for the 90 days, what’s the thing I need to do every day, every day, to get there?” You’re choosing something tiny, the tiniest step you can imagine, but you do it every day for 90 days. Instead of, which is almost every change effort I’ve ever been a part of does the opposite which is go as big as you can, and then of course it’s not sustainable, so really nothing has changed. It’s a fallacy. It’s a pretense that it feels like you’re changing because everything is so different for that tiny period of time, but what we want is the opposite, tiny change for a long period of time.

Bill Blankschaen:

That is so good. That is so good. The book is *Essentialism: The Disciplines Pursuit of Less*. If you’re in the bookstore, look for the scribbles. It’s a dead giveaway. I’ll tell you what, inside is clarity. If you’re a busy parent, you want to listen to it, get the audiobook. It’s available of course on all the eBook versions. It’s on Amazon, it’s wherever you go. We’ll put a link right here in the community so you can get it easily. It is a must-read. It’s essential to read. Cannot recommend it highly enough.

Greg, thank you so much for taking the time out even from your own family to spend time with our families. We so appreciate you. Any last words that we haven’t touched on, thoughts that you have? If not, that’s fine, too. We just appreciate you taking the time, but I didn’t want to not give you a chance to share any final thoughts with the families.

Greg McKeown:

I just want to wish everybody the very best of success with this most important work in life. 100 years from now, we will know in better perspective what mattered, and it changes the whole sense of this. Over time on these personal quarterly offsites, I encourage people to develop a 100-year vision. That means going backwards 100 years and understanding where you’ve come from, and also forward 100 years after you, what you want to be left. I think that that’s maybe the note I’d like to leave us on. Thank you for having me.

Bill Blankschaen:

Oh, it’s been a pleasure. Thank you, Greg McKeown, so appreciate you.