

A Room-by-Room Guide
to a Decluttered, Refocused Life

The Minimalist Home



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JOSHUA BECKER

Author of The More of Less

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The Minimalist Home



JOSHUA BECKER
with Eric Stanford



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Dedicated to my family,
who make home my favorite place to be.

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PART 1

You



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Minimalism Makeover

Make the most of the most important
place on earth—home.

I grew up in Aberdeen, South Dakota, where author L. Frank Baum lived for a while in his adulthood. Because of living there, I learned from an early age about Baum's most famous work, *The Wizard of Oz*. I'd be surprised if you don't know the story as well. The book was a bestseller from the time its first edition came out at the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1939 film version, starring Judy Garland, is today the third most-viewed movie of all time around the world (behind *Titanic* and *E.T.*).¹ And what's the most famous line from the movie? Click your heels together and say it with me: "There's no place like home."

I know not everyone has positive associations with home. For some, home has been a place where they aren't safe or where they feel cut down instead of being encouraged to grow. Some are ashamed of or hostile toward their home. Sadly, some don't have a home at all.

Despite all this, the concept of home as an ideal of comfort and safety, of acceptance and belonging, is one that resonates with almost everyone. It inspires longing within us, regardless of how closely or distantly our actual homes have aligned with that ideal. We yearn to make our homes better places than they have been before, both for ourselves and for the other members of our

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household. There really is no place like home. It is the foremost place on earth, our life's HQ.

Of course, the most important part of a home is the people within it, including the interplay of their relationships, how they spend their time in the home, and the dreams they nurture. But it's also true that a house and its contents can affect the family's quality of life either positively or negatively. And so transforming the place can transform the people.

Make Over the Concept of Home Makeover

I shake my head at those home makeover shows that are so popular on TV. You know, a couple who are discontented with their home invite a design expert to come in and evaluate the situation. The couple nervously agree to stretch their budget as far as possible to make as much of a change as they can. Then a renovation team takes over, carrying out repairs and upgrades (there's always an obstacle that arises and creates drama), and after that the designer stages the house with new furniture, store-bought decorations, and this year's color scheme. Finally the homeowners come back for the big reveal and get teary-eyed at their house's new look.

I shake my head because, even though their house may look nicer, the homeowners typically wind up with just as much stuff as they had before, maybe even more. That's all stuff that may be getting in the way of how they want to spend their days more than it's contributing to the pursuit of their goals. I wonder, after the initial dopamine zap from the redecoration, are their lives really any different? Is their home more personal and life giving to them now, or is it just more pleasing to the eye? Or worse, will their renovated home require more time and money and energy for upkeep than it did in its previous form?

Very few of us get picked to be on TV's home makeover shows, yet most of us who have a house or apartment go through something similar with our own homes. We're disappointed in our living space. We've spent a lot of money buying stuff for our home—and a lot of time organizing, cleaning, and main-

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taining that stuff. And nevertheless, in the rare times we have left to simply enjoy the home, it doesn't feel like the place we really want to live in. What do we do then? If we don't just give up hope, we most likely double down, continuing to look in all the wrong places for help. We pay attention to commercials and visit showrooms and scroll through shopping sites online, and we decide that we need more stuff or better stuff, with a different organizing and decorating plan. And when we take our best shot at making our living space better, it's . . . well, it's somewhat better in some ways, but it still doesn't give fundamental satisfaction or kick off any lasting life change.

What if the problem isn't that we don't own enough stuff or aren't managing our stuff well enough? What if the problem is that we're living in the homes that advertisers and retailers want us to have instead of the homes that deep down we really want and need?

You can help others by sharing *The Minimalist Home* tips on social media by posting or tweeting the tips labeled #minimalisthome you'll find throughout this book.

I'd like to suggest that what the huge majority of people in my own country—the United States—and other countries need if we are going to be content with our homes and start living more fulfilled lives is a minimalist makeover of our homes. Are you willing to come along with me and explore that idea for *your* home—that there is more joy to be found in owning less than we can ever find in accumulating more? I hope you will, because I know from years of experience that by getting rid of the excess stuff in every room, you can transform your home so that you feel not only free from the stress of so much clutter around you but also free to live a life focused on what you want to do with your limited years on this planet.

Consider the benefits of a minimalist makeover of your home:

You don't have to have an interior designer to do this. You don't need a demo-reno team or real estate agent on your side. You don't need a big budget

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(or any budget, really), and the investment of time you make up front is something you will recoup many times over in years to come.

You just need determination—and some advice to guide you on the way!

Revolution Indoors

Over the first decade of their marriage, Shannan and her husband moved several times. But there was one constant: everywhere they went, they accumulated more and more stuff, and it was never long before a new home began to feel crowded and messy. Shannan didn't like this situation and felt guilty but didn't know what to do about it. She could sense a growing resentment from her husband over the clutter situation too. When company was coming over, she would move things around to give an illusion of neatness, but of course such maneuvers didn't address the root problem that they simply owned too much stuff.

Not much changed until Shannan and her husband went on a trip from their home in the Midwest to Tennessee, where they stayed in a cabin. "With only what we packed for the week, the cabin seemed spacious and comfortable, though it wasn't really that large," she said. "Once we got home from the trip, I wanted that for our home—room to breathe and enjoy ourselves without things in the way."

This was Shannan's *Aha!* moment. Her trigger. Her tipping point.

I have noticed that, for most people, there is one moment when something causes them to undertake a minimalist makeover. I tell in my previous book, *The More of Less*, about my own trigger moment in 2008, when I was frustrated while cleaning out my garage on a Saturday and a neighbor pointed out that I didn't need to own all that stuff.

Have you had your own minimalism *Aha!* moment yet? Something that has opened your eyes to the clutter issues you face at home and has pushed you to do something about them? If not, I hope this book will be that friendly shove for you.

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SEVEN SURPRISING FACTS THAT REVEAL HOW MUCH WE OWN

1. In the thirty-five richest countries in the world, total material consumption stands at an average of 220.5 pounds per person each day.²
2. Americans spend \$1.2 trillion annually on nonessential goods.³
3. The United States has more than fifty thousand storage facilities—more than the number of Starbucks, McDonald's, and Subway restaurants combined.⁴ Currently, there are 7.3 square feet of self-storage space for each person in the nation, so that it is theoretically possible that “every American could stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self-storage roofing.”⁵
4. Nearly half of American households are spending so much that they don't save any money.⁶
5. Currently, the “12 percent of the world's population that lives in North America and Western Europe accounts for 60 percent of private consumption spending, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 3.2 percent.”⁷
6. The home organization industry—benefiting from our desperation to try to manage all our stuff—earned retail sales of \$16 billion in 2016 and is growing at 4 percent per year.⁸
7. Over the course of an average lifetime, because of all the clutter we live in, we will spend 3,680 hours, or 153 days, searching for misplaced items. Phones, keys, sunglasses, and paperwork top the list.⁹

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Shannan's cabin epiphany inspired her to finally take action on what I would call her "stuff problem." As soon as she got home, she signed up for my online course, *Uncluttered*, and quickly began making progress on her home. She would take out ten or twelve boxes each week. Her husband got in the spirit as well, clearing out machinery and tools from his garage workshop. Their minimalist home makeover was under way.

Eventually the couple got down to some decisions about what to keep and what to toss that were tougher to make. These are the kinds of decisions that cause some people to quit decluttering before they get the full benefit (and they are some of the decisions I'm going to help you make in this book). Their progress slowed for a while, but they kept going and in the end transformed every part of their home through minimizing.

Minimalism isn't about removing things you love.
It's about removing the things that distract you
from the things you love. **#minimalisthome**

Shannan said, "Our home is now a place where my husband can come home and feel free to pursue his hobbies and for us to be the couple I know we are without fear of resentment or stress from the outside world. A sanctuary of sorts."

But what's remarkable is not just how minimizing has changed how they feel about their house. It's how differently they feel about themselves. (Though I'm really not surprised.)

"To me, it's so not about the stuff anymore," Shannan said. "My husband has changed too. We're bike riding now and spending more time together."

And it goes even deeper than that. "Aside from my relationship with my husband becoming more loving," Shannan added, "I've gone from being a homebody who was afraid of people and what they thought of me to being someone who wants to be a part of things. I'm consciously making efforts to stand among a group of people talking or offering help to a stranger. Looking people in the eyes when I pass them by, connecting. This is really not who I've

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been my whole life, and I feel more included in life now that I'm letting others in. How can getting rid of stuff do this? It's really amazing."

That's right—how *can* mere minimalism change lives in a fundamental way? It seems like too much to expect. Yet I've seen it happen over and over. Owning less creates an opportunity to live more.

I've been writing my blog (*Becoming Minimalist*), teaching minimalism, and speaking about the joys of owning less with folks at conferences around the world for a decade now. And I've seen repeatedly, more times than I can recall, that there is an almost magical effect when people right-size the quantity of their possessions—in the process, *the people themselves* are changed in positive ways.

So although this book is about doing a minimalist makeover of your home, I'm warning you now that it may also mean making over yourself in a thousand unforeseeable, positive ways.

Means to a Better Life for All

I want to mention something before I go any further because, you see, there's something I hate when the term *minimalism* crops up in conversation. What I hate is the misperception that so many people have about minimalism. Many people think of minimalism as a *style* of home, on a par with Colonial homes, Victorian homes, or Southwest adobe homes. A minimalist home, to them, is a boxy white house with almost nothing in it, and if you do happen to find a chair or sofa somewhere, it's going to be really expensive—and good luck feeling comfortable sitting on it! A minimalist home, in this sense, is for people who don't care much about coziness or comfort and definitely don't have kids or pets or hobbies. Such a house might look good in a magazine photo spread, but who wants to live there?

Creating a minimalist home doesn't mean you have to sacrifice your favorite design style—or even your “no-design style” or “frugal living style”—to accomplish it. In my home, for example, we still use my wife's grandparents'

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old bedroom set. It's anything but modern in design, but it works for us. My wife, Kim, our two kids, and I got rid of a lot of things when we were transforming our home, but we didn't get rid of everything, and we didn't feel every room needed a different look or style than it had before.

What's widely known as minimalism in architecture and interior decoration today is fine as a design style, if you happen to like it, but that's not at all what I'm talking about here. I'm promoting an approach to owning less that you can take regardless of the style of your home. It's not about making an artistic statement or glorifying emptiness. Instead, it's about transforming your home so that you can transform your life.

Minimalism, as I'm referring to it, is not about taking something away from you; it's about giving something to you. My definition of *minimalism* is "the intentional promotion of things we most value and the removal of anything that distracts us from them." As I sometimes like to say, minimizing is actually *optimizing*—reducing the number of your possessions until you get to the best possible level for you and your family. It's individual, freeing, and life promoting. It's a makeover that you can do on your own, in your current house, just by getting rid of stuff.

In battling against misperceptions about minimalism, I sometimes feel like Henry Ford when he was trying to convince the masses that automobiles didn't have to be just for the rich. Except what's available to everybody now—in our affluent age when it is sometimes said we've reached "peak stuff"¹⁰—is a radical and amazing home makeover courtesy of minimalism. This is an idea whose time has come. Minimalism isn't just for the few who happen to have some spartan quirk in their personalities; it's for everyone. Homes everywhere would benefit from a thoughtful and deliberate reduction of their possessions load.

So that's how I've written *The Minimalist Home*—with everybody in mind.

This book is for you if you're single or married.

It's for you if you are childless, have one or more kids at home, or have an empty nest where your kids and grandkids come back to visit you from time to time.

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Inspiration

REDEFINING NORMAL

In 2012, my twelve-year-old son asked me a question that really struck a chord in me. “Why do we have so much stuff?” he said. “We always have so much to clean.”

I replied, “It’s normal. People just have a lot of stuff.”

Days passed. My son was burdened with many chores. My soldier husband was being deployed, so my son also had to help me with his younger sisters.

One day he asked me to come into his bedroom and started showing me pictures of minimalist homes on his computer. He told me that, if he were to have a house when he grows up, it would be minimalist—no clutter and no things on display. Imagine those words coming from a twelve-year-old!

I was intrigued. I did my research and stumbled upon *Becoming Minimalist*, which prompted me to become more aware of the stuff around me. In addition to my twelve-year-old, I had two toddlers at that time and thought it would be nearly impossible for us to live clutter-free. But as I read, I was more and more interested in transforming my mind and my surroundings.

Well, a few years and three military moves later, my life and my home are very different. The home isn’t perfect, but we’ve gotten rid of a *lot* of things—too many to count.

Creating a minimalist home isn’t easy, but it’s totally worth it. Minimalism isn’t just about living with less; it is about living meaningfully. It took me a while to believe that less is definitely more, but I’ve seen it to be true over and over again in my life.

I’ll never forget the day my son asked me his question.

—Michelle, USA

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It's for you if you have an apartment, condo, town house, duplex, detached single-family dwelling, cottage, trailer home, cabin, farmhouse, houseboat, or mobile home.

It's for you if you live in the United States, Australia, England, Japan, Canada, South Africa, Brazil, or anyplace else and your home is overcrowded with stuff.

I'm not trying to make you into someone you're not or turn you into some kind of doing-without extremist. You don't have to live in a tiny home or wander the world living out of a backpack. (My family and I don't.) This book is about doing a makeover to *your* home, wherever that home may be and whatever it may be like. Now, after minimizing, you may want to downsize to a smaller place, but you certainly don't have to move in order to enjoy the benefits of home minimalism. You can change your environment and change your life right where you are.

You bought or rented the home you've got for a reason, right? To some extent, you must have liked it, or at least liked what you imagined it would look like after you were done making it your own. Most likely, it's the overaccumulation of goods since then that's keeping it from being what you wanted. So let's address your "stuff problem." And even if you do choose to do some rehabbing or redecorating in addition to uncluttering, that will be easier after you've minimized.

Give yourself the house you've always wished you had. You've already got it! It's hidden underneath all your stuff.

No Place Like It

Consider the following benefits of a minimalist home:

- *A minimized home is a better place to come home to.* Without all the clutter, you'll find that your home is more relaxing and less stressful. With fewer things competing for your attention, you'll appreciate more and make better use of what you have. You'll be

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able to focus more on the people and activities in the home that bring you joy. I know some people fear that minimizing their home will make it feel cold and impersonal, but I assure you, through minimizing, you'll feel more at home than ever. It will be a place you anticipate returning to at the end of every day or relaxing in for a weekend.

- *A minimized home is a better place to go out from.* After you minimize, you'll be buying less stuff and spending less on repairs and maintenance, leaving you with more cash in your bank account—what I call a “minimalism dividend”—that you can use for other purposes. Even more important, because you'll be spending less time and energy cleaning, organizing, and taking care of your possessions, you'll have more time and energy left over for dreaming and planning for the future. With these extra resources, you'll be better prepared to go out into the world, whether it's for a day's work, an evening's entertainment, or a life-changing adventure.

Do you see what a dynamic concept home is? It's all about the flow. For one thing, a home is a safe haven to duck into amid a storm. Yet as John Shedd said, “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.”¹¹ So a home is also a port of departure when you're ready to brave the high seas of life again.

Both benefits of home minimalism—the coming home to and the going out from—are important, but it's the second one that gets me more excited. I don't know about you, but I'll take *significance* over *stuff* every time. I want to *contribute* more than to *consume*.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is desperate to get home. This theme has helped the movie stand the test of time. But notice that her time away from home in the Land of Oz is actually more exciting, providing a thrilling experience in which she grows as a person and helps others along the way. (There's a reason why, in the film version, the Oz sequences are in color while the Kansas parts are in black and white.) The lesson in this for us is that life away from home may be scary, but it's full of potential—and a minimized home can prepare us

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to go out and encounter it more freely and effectively. That's what Shannan and I and so many other everyday minimalists have discovered again and again.

By doing a minimalist makeover of your home, you, too, can set out on a new course toward fulfilling your purpose and potential in life. And for this reason I just *had* to write *The Minimalist Home* for you.

The All-You-Need Book on How to Minimize at Home

Inevitably, each time I launch my three-times-annually online uncluttering course, someone will post a comment like “Why would anyone need a course on minimalism? It's easy. Just throw out everything you don't need!”

It drives me crazy to see a comment along those lines. True, there *are* some people (a relative few) who need nothing more than the suggestion that they should own less stuff and they can do the rest for themselves. But that's not most of us. Although we have all no doubt tossed out unused stuff from time to time, many of us don't have experience with making a thorough and lasting change in the material circumstances of our home. Even worse, we've been conditioned since birth by the culture we live in to constantly pursue more and more. So a lot of people need or want an easy-to-follow, thoroughly tested how-to guide to carry them through the process of decluttering the home. *This book is that book.* My promise to you is that you'll find it comprehensive, practical, and encouraging.

Here I've brought together all my key teachings on minimalism. Addressing all the usual concerns, I'm also covering the whole home—every space you'll find in a typical home—in methodical fashion. Furthermore, I've loaded it with handy lists, inspiring testimonials, special topics that will help you form your own strategies for minimizing, and other tools to make it valuable for you to turn to again and again.

So if you're going to own only one book on minimalism to make a lasting change in your home and life, this is it! I know I wish that my wife and I had

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had this book when we were setting out on our own minimalism journey ten years back. It would have made the process so much easier. I'm thrilled to think of what it's going to do for you.

Before I go any further, I want to take a moment and congratulate you for picking up this book and considering the idea of owning less. Minimalism as a movement is taking off worldwide, yet it still remains countercultural, going against the consumerism and materialism that are pervasive all around us. In a society that consistently paints more and more accumulation as the basis for happiness, owning less requires intentionality, courage, and perseverance. You have to overcome your own inertia, make challenging choices, and establish new habits to minimize and stay minimized. It is not easy, but it is one of the best decisions anybody can make. While people who have something to sell to us shout consumption, minimalism softly invites us to reorient our pursuits around the things that matter most.

If you're dissatisfied with your living space, the wonderful news is that you can create the atmosphere you want in the home you already have—and you don't need to get selected for a TV home makeover show to discover it.

I hope you're ready right now to throw out the excess, clean up the mess, say no to stress, and live with less. Because minimizing your home won't be good just for you; it will also be good for your family. And if I may say so, it will be a prophetic sign for the rest of society about looking in a higher place for our values.

Use this book enthusiastically. Share it widely.

I'm honored to be a part of your journey.

Action recommendation: *You'll be learning my method for removing clutter from the home in the next chapter. But if you're so excited that you feel like doing some decluttering right this very moment, go for it! Make a sweep through your home, grabbing easy stuff to get rid of and enjoying a sense of accomplishment immediately.*

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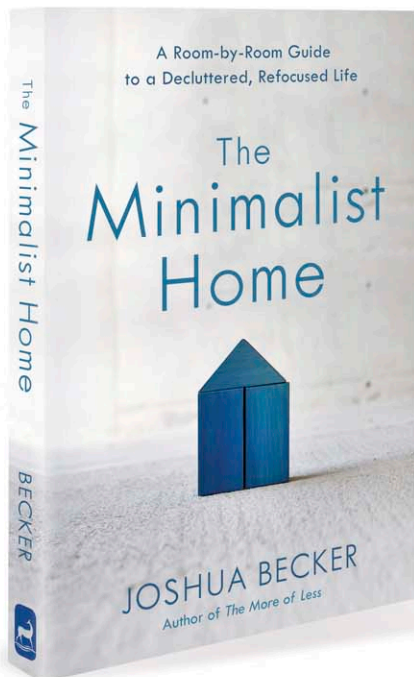
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