

EPISODE 252

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:21.1] AVH: Hey, everybody. Welcome to Paleo Magazine Radio. I'm your host, Ashleigh VanHouten, and I have a very, very exciting interview for you today. I'm really, really excited to share it and I think it's something that's going to be relevant to pretty much everybody that's listening to this podcast.

If you've ever felt like you are wasting time on social media, or that maybe you're a little too addicted to your smartphone, or if you maybe are on Netflix too much, or if you feel like the modern world with all of its electronic bells and whistles are distracting you from the things you really want to do, well you are absolutely not alone. In fact, if you don't feel that way, you might be the minority, where we live, but I think most of us are in the same boat.

Maybe on different ends of it, depending on how extreme the issue is for us, but I think if you're listening to a podcast, that means that you have enough digital savvy to probably also have a smartphone, a laptop, probably a TV, probably more than one social media app or other distraction on your phone, that if you get right down to it, you probably don't really need it, probably don't find it deeply rewarding. You could probably cutback and get rid of it completely and it would improve your life, rather than detract from it.

When I think our current digital distraction landscape, I think of it similar to food when it comes to addiction or unhealthy, dysfunctional relationships. I don't want to get into a deep dive about what addiction means, because that's beyond my scope. I think that some addictions, like illegal drugs for example, they can be eradicated from your life completely because they serve no healthy purpose and they're not even really an accepted part of a healthy life.

Food and technology, when you have an unhealthy relationship with either one, it can be insidious, because it's really impossible in the modern world to get rid of either. You have to eat, period. 99% of us, we also have to use technology, honestly for work, for communicating with family that don't live close by, etc.

For those of us who are feeling increasingly uneasy, or less in control of our social media use, but we also recognize that the answer isn't just to move out into the woods and never look at a screen again. The author of a very famous and life-changing book called *Deep Work*, his name is Cal Newport. He just wrote a new book called *Digital Minimalism*. It may change the way you look at all of these. It's worth noting, our managing editor Shawn also wrote a book review of *Digital Minimalism* in an upcoming issue, so check out that when it comes out.

In this interview, I have the huge honor of speaking with Cal and ask him questions about the book and how we can navigate the blessing and the curse that is modern technology. One thing I want to say right now about the book and about this conversation, because it maybe something you're concerned about right off the bat, this is not a condemnation of Facebook.

It's not saying we all need to throw out our smartphones in the garbage. It's not even a discussion about how social media use is killing our brains and our relationships, although kind of is. It's a much more pragmatic and hopeful take on technology and how useful it is when used mindfully.

There is plenty of useful and tangible information about how to be intentional about our tech use, how to determine what stuff it's taking from our lives and what's adding to it and information on how to harness the newfound free time that you are going to have unencumbered by distractions, to just live a more focused life and get what you want out of your life and not just be passively letting it go by. I think the book is fantastic. I'm so glad that I had the opportunity to speak with him and read the book and share this out with you.

Cal Newport, by the way, is a computer science professor at Georgetown University, which actually the more of his work that you read, you'll realize it's really not ironic at all that a computer science professor talks about how to use the stuff less, but we'll get into that. He went to MIT and Dartmouth College and now he writes with the intersection of technology and society, especially on the impact of new technologies on our ability to perform productive work and lead satisfying lives.

I mentioned his other amazing book called *Deep Work*, which is a discussion on how to actually focus, be able to just focus, it's so hard these days, and get the best quality, most meaningful

work done in a world full of distractions. This new book, *Digital Minimalism*, of course, touches on that as well. Here is my interview with Cal Newport. First, a quick word about our awesome show sponsor, Bonafide Provisions.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:04:41.4] AVH: Bonafide Provisions has been a great sponsor of ours. They're a company that I really like. I post about a lot, because I think they're really doing things the right way. They're a family-owned company founded by a clinical nutritionist and they make certified organic bone broth the way it's always been done, using only bones, no filler stock and slow simmering for 18 to 48 hours.

They don't use high heat processing, no preservatives to make it shelf stable. You got to eat it right away after you thaw it, but you will because it's delicious. They've got chicken, beef, turkey flavors, they have this frontier blend which also includes lamb and bison, I really like. I personally use bone broth as especially for an afternoon coffee or tea replacement if you're trying to cut down on caffeine, but keep up with the nutrients and the warming comfort cup, especially in winter, it's great.

Yeah, so they also recently launched a line of soups that combine the bone broth and organic vegetables and they've got these yummy flavors, like butternut squash and chicken - vegetable. I mean, I just like it because they do a great job, they do a better job than I do at home and it's easy.

If you want to try them out, they are giving our listeners a deal on any Bonafide products if you use the code `onlybones` at checkout, you'll get 15% off. Go to bonafideprovisions.com and order now.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:06:05.6] AVH: All right, Cal. Welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

[0:06:08.4] CN: Of course. Thanks for inviting me.

[0:06:10.1] AVH: Very, very excited to talk to you. I'm going to try to do my best to be organized with it and not just jump all over the place. I just finished the reading the book and I was making a lot of notes about – like specific questions that I want to ask you, so I'm going to be maybe a little bit selfish, but I'm assuming that I have these questions, other people have them too. We'll maybe start specific and then maybe work our way out instead of the opposite and we'll see how it goes.

[0:06:37.0] CN: All right. Sounds good.

[0:06:38.5] AVH: Yeah. I have to say I was very excited to read this new book *Digital Minimalism*. I did think that it was going to be, among other things, sort of a straightforward talk about the ways in which social media and new technology can be detrimental and also talk about some concrete ways to, I don't know, create some mindfulness around the ways we use technology.

That info is definitely in this book, but I learned so much more than I thought. I was taking notes about companies and people who are doing really cool things in this world and tangible ways to be more mindful about your social media and technology use. I think that one of the things that surprised me about this book is that it's really a lot more positive than I expected it to be. Not to say that I expected this book to be doom and gloom, but we all know that this is an increasing issue in our lives, right? Using technology a little bit too passively and a little bit too much.

The book wasn't just here are the ways social media is terrible and wasting our lives. There was a lot more positivity and hope in the book maybe than I expected. I really, really got a lot out of it. I just wanted to tell you that it was just – it was a book that maybe feel better about things instead of worse. I think that people need to know that before they get into it. It's not just a scary book about all the ways that we're wasting our lives, right? I appreciate that.

[0:08:01.1] CN: Facebook is going to be your doom.

[0:08:03.0] AVH: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think a lot of us despite the fact that we're still just passively using these things all the time, we aren't clueless about the fact that we are wasting

our time, a lot of us. Maybe we aren't as aware of how much time we're spending, but I think that most people and I guess I'm speaking to my age group and the 30 some things and maybe the older millennials, I guess. We're all aware we've been more attached to our phones and probably isn't good and all the things we could be doing if we weren't on Instagram all day.

I think that framing it in a way, instead of just being like, "This is terrible and you're terrible and you're wasting your time." Instead, framing it in here are the ways that technology is good and important and we should just be more mindful and more strategic about the way we use it so that we can do all these other things. I think that that approach is certainly something that's more positive and more hopeful and probably going to help people more than the other way.

[0:08:57.1] CN: Right. Well, I mean, that's really one of the surprises of working on this book is that when you actually dive deeper into what is this unease that people are increasingly feeling about technology, it's not as much about the technology as you would. That's what's surprising. It's not that okay, there is something evil happening on the screen. When you're looking at the screen and whatever, tapping a heart on an Instagram post that somehow that's bad.

That's not really the problem. It's not the tech, it's what it is keeping people away from. It's become a crutch, or a way to actually avoid doing the harder, but ultimately more fulfilling and meaningful stuff in your life.

That's why I think the book comes across as positive is that a lot of it is actually about how do you actually rebuild a much deeper, more satisfied, meaningful, largely analog portion of your life, so the stuff that the digital helps us avoid. It was a lot less about technology that I thought it was going to be. It was a lot less about here's what's specifically bad about Facebook and a lot more about, here's what's really great when you're not spending so much time on Facebook, that you're doing this instead or that instead.

You're outside, that you're building something with your hands that you're sitting down at a community organization to help something in your town. These things sound simple, but they're really the grist of a life well-lived. And this is where you start to get the negatives of technology is not that hey, this thing is digital drugs that's frying your brain. This is keeping you from this

other stuff and this other stuff is really great. Let's step back and look at this other stuff and how you can actually use tech to boost it as opposed to get in the way.

[0:10:30.0] AVH: Yeah, yeah. I think another element that's important for people to, again, just be more educated and mindful about, instead of just this doom and gloom, this is terrible, cut it out of your life is something I hadn't really considered, is that so much of this technology from our smartphones to the apps that we use, they weren't all necessarily created to be used the way they are used now.

You talk about the smartphone, when that was invented it was really more about how can we combine the music listening devices with our cellphones and it wasn't like we were creating this thing that we all be on the internet constantly and be looking down our phones when we're walking through busy intersections. It was like, how can we make certain things easier. I think even with social media I mean, we could have this discussion about how technology is really a lot of the time now being created purely to see how long we can stay on these apps and how long we can keep our attention on them.

Something like Facebook when it first came out, there really wasn't a lot of interaction. There wasn't a lot you could do. You couldn't spend hours and hours scrolling through ads and liking things and interacting with things, because that functionality wasn't really there. That stuff got built in gradually and that's why it's almost more insidious, because you don't see it happening. When it is happening, it's happening initially under the guise of being more interactive and having a richer interaction with someone.

You think, Facebook, it used to be you just look at pictures. Then they added the ability to talk to people and like things and comment on things. That's of course good, because now we can interact more. That's still not – it's taking the place real life interaction, which of course they're never going to add up.

[0:12:13.2] CN: Right. I mean, this is another major source of the unease. I think people have about their digital life is this notion if we didn't sign up for it. I really got into it and the research because I was curious that almost any of these technologies we spent so much time looking at, most people signed up, as you mentioned, for completely different reasons.

I mean, the like button for example, the right way to think about that is that was not introduced for the benefit of Facebook users. That was introduced for the benefit of early Facebook investors. What was happening is they were getting closer to the point where they wanted to do an IPO, so that the early investors could get their hundred X return.

The issue was they weren't having nearly enough user engagement minutes to try to justify the price they wanted for the stock. There was this big moment in Facebook internally where they had to figure out how do we significantly boost user engagement minute, so therefore really boost the advertisement revenue?

The shift to mobile for Facebook was a shift in the Facebook experience. They said we have to change this from a classic web 2.0 experience, where you occasionally post things about yourself and you go and you look at stuff posted by other people you know and it has to be something where people will look at it all day long. Now how are we going to do that? There's literally not – your friends are not nearly posting enough information for this to be the case.

They transformed the whole experience, so that it was now about not you looking at what your friends were up to, but about creating a stream of social approval indicators that are coming at you. Instead of going to see hey, did my friend go on a vacation, or did my friend's roommate change her relationship status? It was now about there's the stream of likes and tags and comments, or whatever it is coming at you, indications that other people are thinking about you. It's a rich stream. It's a stream that arrives intermittently. If you hit the app right now, you might not see anything new, but if you do 10 minutes from now, there might be seven likes there, or there might be a couple comments.

That was invented. That's a completely different experience that say someone like you or I might have signed up for back at the college dorm in the early 2000s. It's a completely different experience. They changed it on everyone, because that drove up user engagement minutes. There's examples like that throughout all of technology, but this is a big reason why people today feel uneasy if they can't really put their finger on it, because there's some notion of wait a second, I vaguely remember signing up for thefacebook.com when I was 22-years-old, so that I could look at who's the boyfriend or girlfriend of someone I know at college.

Now I'm looking at this a hundred times a day. This is a completely foreign experience to what I signed up for. If you presented this to me from scratch like hey, here's this new service and here's what you're going to do. I never would have signed up for it. And yet, now I am. Same thing with the smartphone. I mean, Steve Jobs' vision was take things that people really like, namely making phone calls and listening to music and make the experience beautiful, right?

It was a minimalist vision. Take things people love and give them the experience they love even more. This notion that no, no, it's going to be a constant companion. You're going to look at it all day long and it's a source of information that you're now like an EMT dispatcher that needs to be looking at alerting information all day long, that wasn't the original vision. People bought the iPhone because they used to have to carry an iPod and their Nokia Razor both in their pocket and it was bulky. Now they're combined in one. There is a lot of that going on.

I think people are starting to step back and say, "Wait a second. What is all of this?" Which is why really the key idea in *Digital Minimalism* is that it's time to start from scratch. You clear all this stuff out of your personal digital life and say, "Okay, I don't know where all this – how all of this metaphorical junk got on to my shelves and into my metaphorical attic, but I have too much junk in my house. Clear it all out. Let's rebuild it from scratch, but let's do it a little bit more carefully this time."

[0:15:46.7] AVH: Okay. This is a huge question, it may be too early in the conversation to get into, but it's in my head so I want to get it out. What do you think will happen if we – if *Digital Minimalism* succeeds and most of us start to look at social media apps and technology in a more pared down way and a more mindful way and we use it less in general?

How do apps like Facebook look in 10 to 15 years, or how do they survive? These are the biggest companies — some of the biggest companies in the world and certainly in America, because they have monopolized so much of our time and then the advertisers can do all the things that they can do and it's grown so hugely.

But if we can all get to a point where we're using it only the time that we need to use it, instead of hours and hours a day mindlessly, how do they adjust to that? How can they come back from

how massive and ubiquitous it is now to a more reasonable tool? What does it look like if we actually do start using it the way we should, instead of just mindlessly all day long?

[0:16:56.2] CN: Well, I think the idea that you're going to have a company like Facebook with a 500 billion dollar market cap, that goes away. There's no reason – there's nothing about the current architecture of the internet, or the technologies needed to express yourself or connect to people or find ideas on the internet, there's nothing about any of that infrastructure technology that says, “Unless we have a massive 500 billion dollar company with a billion plus user base, no one's going to be able to do those things.”

I think the internet worked just fine before Facebook was there. I think the internet could work just fine without it. I think the idea that you have these massive companies that are trying to create their own version of the internet behind their private walled garden, I don't think that's a model that is going to persist. Just like AOL tried to do in the 90s. They said, “Well, there's this worldwide web, but it's scary and you have to download a web browser and it's a little bit confusing, so we'll just build our own internet, inside our own walled garden and we'll call it AOL and we'll charge users to use it.”

That worked for a while, but the people said, “Actually, I'm not so scared about downloading Netscape,” and AOL went away. That's essentially what Facebook is trying to do with the web 2.0. They're trying to say, “Well, look. I don't know. You want to have web pages of blogs and find people and send emails to people? That's all confusing. We'll build our own internet and we'll make the interface really easy. Of course, you'll have to pay for it. In this case, instead of giving us money, we'll just monitor every single thing you do and sell you to advertisers, but you paid for it. It's easier, because the internet outside our walled garden is too scary.”

I think people are less and less likely to buy that argument, right? There's nothing that Facebook really does that you couldn't replicate at least the key attributes outside of it. I think this is a good thing. I mean, I think it's intensely artificial, this notion that we need companies that large.

Facebook for a while had a market cap that was twice that of ExxonMobil. Meaning, the value in extract the time and attention for people's heads was twice as valuable as extracting oil and

natural gas from the ground, even though our entire industrial economy runs on oil and natural gas. That's huge. That's almost absurd.

They go away, at least in that form. I think that's fine, because the internet is fundamentally this exuberant, decentralized, peer-to-peer world in which the whole point is you don't need 500 billion dollar companies to run it. It's kinda the whole point. I think we're in the historical blip now that we're attempting to consolidate the internet and build a new version within just a small number of very large companies.

There's really almost nothing they do that requires them to be a massive company. The only thing they could really say that says, "This is why we need the internet to be with it our walled garden is that it does make it easier for you to maintain lightweight week tie contacts."

It's true. If you want to have a way of saying happy birthday to someone you knew 15 years ago, you do need a billion users to all be within the same social ecosystem. I don't think that's worth it. As someone who's never had a social media account, I'll tell you it's true, people I knew at college don't send me little digital ASCII characters saying happy birthday on my birthday, but I'm okay. Not the rant, but I think the aberration.

What we're talking about minimalism using technology more selectively, that's not what's strange. I mean, let's be honest. I think 99% of Facebook users could get 99% of the value they get out of Facebook logging twice a week for 10 minutes. There's no reason why this has to be a 500 billion dollar company that gets 50 minutes on average per day from its users of engagement. That's out of whack. They would go away and I think that'd be okay.

[0:20:26.6] AVH: Yeah, okay. Yeah. You do outline a lot of really tangible, easy to understand ways to get our heads around this, but one thing and it relates to the conversation we're having right now that really turned on a light bulb for me, one quick analogy that I think anybody listening if they think about this themselves, it's really eye-opening is how much time you'd spend on Facebook if it started charging me by the minute? How much time do you need on Facebook, or and for Instagram, because I know that a lot of people in my immediate world were more Instagram people than Facebook people.

We spend so much time on it and try not to think about it. We even now have our smartphones that tell us how much time we spend a day, which is another possibly useful tool, but also a scary one because it's really showing us how much time we're wasting. Think about how much time you would spend on it if it charged you by the minute. You could suddenly probably cut that down pretty significantly when it was really directly attached to your bank account.

I think that thinking about it that way, it shows you really how much time you need versus how much time you're possibly wasting. That was really – that was eye-opening for me. I was like, “Wow. Really? Charge me by the minute? I'd be on that thing way less. Way less.”

[0:21:42.6] CN: That would be fine too. I mean, I see this a lot because when I talk to people about social media in particular and I say, “Okay, what's really the reason, right? What's the reason why you can't quit this?” Often there's reasons and they're often legitimate. There almost never a reason that necessitates that they have access to it, let's say while they're waiting at line, or while they're in the bathroom or something like that. The reason is usually there's a Facebook group that I need to keep up with, or this is how I, whatever, follow what my brother who lives overseas does, or something like this, right?

There's usually reasons — none of these reasons really involve, require you to have news producer style access every minute. That I do this experiment where I say, “Well, let's take it off your phone because none of these reasons you gave me requires you to have to access this really quickly.” You have a laptop at home or desktop and you can access it just fine, so you don't lose any functionality.

People that agree to do this experiment say, “Okay this is fine. It's going to be a pain that I got to be logging onto my computer so much, but whatever.” You'd be surprised by how often someone goes off to do this experiment. Some of them swears they could never quit, because they have reason X, Y and Z. They come back and says, “I haven't logged on my desktop computer once the last month.”

Just a little bit of friction. It's a little bit of friction and they're like, okay it doesn't matter enough. I'm not going to walk upstairs and click on a web browser tab that just seems too much effort, which really the conclusion is like okay, so this 50 minutes a day that you're using was not about

function, it was about boredom busting. There's better ways —there's better things to do with the free time.

Anyways, I think that type of experiment gets at exactly what you're saying is if you add a little bit of friction in my experience, people's usage type drastically reduces, even people who swear up and down that their entire social and professional lives would crumble if they didn't have access to these tools. You make it a little bit difficult, it turns out they do just fine without them.

[0:23:28.3] AVH: Right. Well, I think because human beings are still hardwired to try and take the path of least resistance and the easiest way out, which I think is why we're so attracted to social media in the first place. Because we think it makes that connecting with people and being on top of news that much easier, but it's just such a less rich form of connecting and that's what we start to realize when we start cutting it a little bit more out of our lives, right?

[0:23:53.4] CN: Yeah. Well and I think the right way to think about your time – I mean, to use I think a relevant metaphor for your audience is take the paleo philosophy and expand it outside of just food and physical activity. Expand it to other parts of your life, right? What have we evolved historically? What's our ancestral approaches to connect you with people finding meaning, feeling fulfilled? We get real answers at that.

It says, well you need to spend time with your close friends, your family and the community where you live. You need to invest real time, make sacrifices, be there with people, connecting with them, sacrifices on their behalf. You need to take on responsibilities, right, among your close friends, family and community. Do things, be useful. You need to do quality things with your leisure time, if possible things that require you to manipulate objects in the real world that have an effect.

I get into this in the book, but we're evolved as essentially hands connected to a brain in some sense, right? I mean, our brain understands the world as physical objects that we manipulate. We use our hands, we hit and flake the stone and then we get a sharp edge off of it. We do the careful skilled whatever maneuver to scrape the skin of the mastodon, or whatever this is. Our brain expects us to be engaging with a physical 3D world, with gravity and resistance and friction and getting feedback, our perceived feedback through our heads, right?

The Paleo approach to how should you spend your time when say, actually you're going to be much happier if you did eat something or carving something out of wood, than if you are looking at pixels lighting up on the screen.

Actually, I think the paleo movement has this right. If you just expand the ancestral approach to how you spend your time, not just how you eat and how you move, it gives you all the right answers. It gives the same answers I got by looking at all the other types of research and philosophies for researching this book, you get to the same place.

[0:25:40.1] AVH: Yeah. I mean, just to dip into some of the scary stuff for a while, the idea of how we use the ubiquity with which we use technology can actually affect the way that your brain works. I'd love for you to get into this a little bit more.

I mean, I know firsthand, like one example that I use is my use of Google Maps and trying to figure out where to get to places. There are places that I go to with relative frequency that because I use my Google Maps to figure out how to get there, I have never fully put it into my brain how to get to that place. Even though it's a place that I go to enough and it's close enough and that I should know how to get there, because I rely on technology to tell me, I have never figured it out for myself.

Whereas, if I was maybe looking it up on my laptop before I leave to go wherever I'm going, I have to commit it to memory, or I have to think about it in a way that it will stay in my brain. Because I use Google Maps, I do not have that. If I didn't have my phone, I wouldn't know how to get to the stupid place that I should definitely know how to get to by now.

Can you talk a little bit about how that works in our brains and why that's something we should be aware of, I guess?

[0:26:51.9] CN: Well, there's definitely things we lose. Your example is a good one. Our brains are evolved to try to build and orient 3D maps of space. Conceptually just in our head, start placing landmarks that orient them into some actual this is north, this is south, this is where the river is, the large mountain is to the west of the river. I'm here, so I'm going to have to move this

place. Being able to keep a mental map of yourself a 3D space is something that a lot of evolutionary energy went into.

Google Maps takes that away, so now you're leaving a big part of your brain dormant, leaving parts of your dormant tends to create issues. We see this pop up in other places as well. Another place where we see issues is actually reading. Reading is not a natural behavior. It's something that we figured out whatever it was 10,000 years ago. It's been the foundation on which civilization has been built, because once we figured out how to do exhaustive training, overtake parts of our brain and aim it at doing reading, what that actually enables is long form thinking.

If you want to have science, if you want to have innovation, if you want to have great ideas of philosophy, you have to train the brain to be able to hold and focus on complex thoughts. Reading was basically a universal form of doing this type of cognitive training that enabled long form thinking and that enabled in turn, really big insights, really big innovations. Well, we're losing that capability.

Doing the quick, skim type reading that we do on phones and tablets, where we jump around the things that are emotionally charged, then pull the ripcord as soon as we get a little bit bored, it's diminishing the ability to do this type of long form thinking, which is one of the most powerful skills we have. My 2016 book, *Deep Work* is basically arguing this is the killer app of the knowledge economy. The worse you get at deep thinking, the worse off you're going to be.

The other thing we seem to have been losing quite recently, let's say the last five or six years is comfort being alone with our own thoughts. This turns out to be crucial. I mean, for both self-reflection, as well as innovation or professional insight, you have to spend a lot of time just thinking, processing inputs, thinking about things, trying to understand what they mean, vis-à-vis, other experiences in your life, reflecting on what's going on, where you want to go. These processes of solitude are absolutely crucial for human development and flourishing.

Until about five or six years ago, the idea that you could eliminate solitude from your life was absurd. I mean, how would you possibly do it? You're just going to have times a lot throughout

the day where you're just somewhere and you have no other inputs from other minds, so you just have to think.

The smartphone and wireless internet has made it possible for the first time in human history to completely banish solitude from your life. This is causing disastrous, hard to quantify but disastrous, in my opinion, consequences. If you lose your comfort and practice, which just to be alone with your own thoughts, really bad things happen as well. There is a lot of these impacts. It's not frivolous. What happens when you take really important things that have been around in our civilization for a long time and they'd start messing around with powerful new technologies.

[0:29:56.3] AVH: Yeah. I want to talk about this idea of solitude a bit more. I have a couple questions, because I thought that chapter was really, really interesting. It was a different approach than I have seen before. And it was the idea that of course, solitude and being able to be alone with your thoughts is a very valuable thing. I think the definition is something that we aren't all aware of and it's not that to be – to have solitude, you have to be in a cave, or on top of a mountain by yourself, but that it's really about being free from the input of other minds and that's how you put it.

If I'm going for a walk in the woods and I'm thinking I'm having this great moment of solitude and I'm by myself, whatever, but I'm listening to a podcast, or even listening to music, I mean, you're not really alone with your own thoughts, because you're still allowing yourself to be distracted, or to be thinking about someone else's thoughts, instead of your own.

Conversely, I guess you could be sitting in a crowded coffee shop. If you're sitting there and focusing on your thoughts and what's going on in your head, there's more solitude there than if you're alone in a cabin but you're watching Netflix, right?

[0:31:02.9] CN: Yeah, that's right. To give credit where credit is due, so that definition comes from this great book called *Lead Yourself First* by Mike Erwin and Ray Kethledge. Ray Kethledge is actually a famous district court judge. He was on the shortlist for the Supreme Court recently, so it's an interesting combination of writers, but they both really respected solitude.

They had this great definition, which really was an aha moment for me, because once I had that definition, freedom from input from other minds, it brought into a focus a lot of things I was finding in my research. We know it's crucial.

The right way to think about it is if we want to use a computer metaphor, there's two steps involved in generated useful output in your life. One is getting information in the system and second is processing the information. So when you're listening to this podcast for example, you're not in a state of solitude because obviously, you're getting input from my mind and Ashleigh's mind, but you're getting a lot of input. That's good.

If you really want to make any use of this input in your life, you also have to do some processing. You have to sit with your own thoughts to think about it, well what does this mean? How does this compare to other things, I know? How's it compare with my other values and initiatives? What do I do with this information?

That processing step is crucial for almost everything. It requires a lot more time than we realize, just hours and hours of thinking and processing. It helps if you think about it like a computer. Great, what if you feed good input into your fancy computer, but you got to give that time, you got to give that machine time, you got to give it compute cycles to sit there and process or you're not going to get value out. If you take out that processing piece and you just keep flooding the computer with input, the value of the output you get on the other end could be significantly diminished.

[0:32:40.8] AVH: The idea of being okay with being with your own thoughts I think is something that is a deeper conversation, even than this social media aspect will allow, because I think most of us as you've said, many of us basically experience zero solitude.

We go out of our way to not have to be alone with our own thoughts and do that introspective self-reflection that I think is scary for a lot of us, because then it means we have to maybe put the attention in to accomplish the things we want to accomplish, or we have to reflect on the things that maybe we're doing wrong, or that we think we're not following our true path and doing the work that we need to do.

I think even from an analogue perspective, like I think about my own life and from a very young age, I've been someone who loves to read and I read a lot and I try to read a book a week. I've always been a big reader. I remember even before social media was a thing and even before I have smartphone, I could not sit down by myself alone and not have a book in front of me.

I couldn't eat breakfast unless I had a book in my hand. I didn't want to get on a subway, or in a car, or on a plane without book. I was always distracting myself that way and I thought of it as a good thing, because who's going to tell you not to read a book?

It really is escapism a lot of the time, because instead of sitting and thinking about maybe what I have to do today, or things that I don't want to dwell on, I'm just reading my book instead. I think that that's a real – that's a deeper issue, even for people who could maybe get rid of their social media, or their smartphone for 30 days, they may still have a very hard time with that real, alone with yourself and your thoughts, part of it.

What is some advice, or maybe some calming words you can give us for how we can really approach that? Because it's one thing to get rid of the distraction, it's another thing to do that work, that introspective work, or that comfort with solitude that I think is an even deeper issue.

[0:34:32.8] CN: Well, it is terrifying for lots of people. I think that's helpful to recognize. It doesn't seem weird if for you the aspect, if you're thinking about this, you're listening to this, the idea of being alone with your thoughts is really scary. That's not unusual. That's actually a very common reaction.

Something to keep in mind is the importance of cultivating this skill is a really old idea. In the book, I start with Blaise Pascal and I go to Ben Franklin and to Abraham Lincoln, then to Virginia Woolf, then to Wendell Berry. You can connect this log thread where everyone talks about okay, you need this time alone with your thoughts.

The way they talk about it is not in the sense of, "Oh, this is just an obvious thing you should do." The reason they're talking about it is because it is practiced and it is hard. It's like when people talk about exercise or something like that. It might actually take some practice before you and your body are very comfortable doing the hard physical things. It's the same thing with

solitude. That's the reason why we see it come up again and again and writing from great minds is that they recognize it's an important thing to do and it's something though that if you are going to succeed with it is going to require – some structure, is going to require some practice.

I think it's okay that is terrifying, but it's something that needs to be done. Maybe you start with relatively small sessions. I recommend going for walks without your phone with you. So you have no option. You are just going to be alone. You don't have to say okay, this walk I'm going to be reflecting on the meaning of life, right? You don't have to be Nietzsche in the mountains, putting together his decks of great book, right?

[0:36:03.7] AVH: Thank goodness.

[0:36:05.9] CN: I mean, wherever your mind wants to go at first is fine. In fact, at first your mind is going to replicate a social media feed. It's going to bounce around like remember this, what about this, it's going to think about emails want to write, it's going to craft scenarios, it's going to do whatever. That's fine. You just building a comfort of I don't always have to have stimuli. Once it gets comfortable, then you could start actually training, doing some more focused thinking.

One of the ideas I had in my previous book was called productive meditation, which is where you go for a walk, again without a phone and now you have a thing you want to think about on that walk. What I used to do and it was always a professional problem. It would be a math-proof I was trying to solve in my capacity as a professor, or maybe a chapter structure I was trying to get right in my capacity as a writer, but one thing and you try to hold your thinking, just on that one problem in your head.

When you're thinking moves away from it, which it will do and starts thinking about an e-mail you need to send, or something that someone said in social media, just like in mindfulness meditation, you notice it, they pull your attention back to the thing you're supposed to think about. If it drifts again, you just notice that and you pull it back.

It's like you're doing mindfulness meditation, except focused on a particular problem or thought and you're just practicing bringing your mind back. That's very powerful. It's very hard at first, but it's very powerful.

Third, a lot of people have a lot of success actually introducing an actual mindfulness meditation practice, because it helps them gain some separation between themselves and the constant chatter. It allows them to see the constant chatter as a separate thing from themselves, which is a very important preconditioned state to be good at putting that aside and actually having deeper insights.

Obviously, there's a lot of sources for finding out more about that. I find Jon Kabat-Zinn to be the grandfather of secularized mindfulness meditation of the last few decades, but there's other sources as well.

All this advice aside, the meta point here is this is really important. The great minds have been thinking about it for a long time, but they've also been emphasizing for a long time that it's hard. I think once people recognize that, it's less scary, or they seem like less unusual is going on when it seems at first like a terrifying experience.

[0:38:13.0] AVH: Yeah, I like that point. I think that I mean, obviously we all know that oftentimes the things we really need to do are not the easiest things we need to do. I think it is worth bringing home that even before social media and smartphones were a thing, our brains were hardwired to be distracted by the shiny, little, immediate, quick, easy things in front of our eyes, rather than the deeper work that sometimes we need to do so. I think that that's yeah – that's a good thing to be reminded of.

I love the Lincoln example, because that was a story I didn't know that he had this cabin that he went to and he spent, I don't know, like half of his time there and he would commute by horse to the White House because he had to have a place where people couldn't get at him to do the thinking that he needed to do, even though it was a dangerous thing for him to be commuting back and forth.

It was another thing that I didn't know, but I guess that makes sense. Back in his day, people could just go to where he worked and knock on the door and be like, “I need to ask you a question, or I need to tell you – I need to air my grievances.”

Imagine trying to get the work of the presidency done in that – but I guess it's the same thing now, because now people can just tweet and yell over the internet. I guess, it's pretty similar. I thought that was a really, really cool example. You do talk a lot about different examples, the benefits of solitary walks. I don't know if you've read the book *Daily Rituals*. Have you read this book?

[0:39:34.3] CN: Yes, Mason Currey. Yes.

[0:39:35.4] AVH: Yeah, yeah. I love that book. It's a lot of writers with other successful people and talking about their ritual and how they got their work done and how they spent their days and so many of these people — not necessarily people that you want to model your lifestyle after, because some of the more very unhealthy people, or heavy drinkers, or whatever.

So many of them had this walking practice, that's like that's where they went to clear their head, that's where they went to think about their work or their writing and that's where they got their ideas down and maybe they bring a notebook, but it was just this act of walking, sometimes with friends but oftentimes by themselves.

What do you think it is about walking, even more than say I go on a bike ride, or I go to the gym and do some mindless physical activity? There's something primal I guess, but there's something about walking more than anything that really gets that, I don't know, gets you in that headspace.

[0:40:25.9] CN: I mean, it comes up all the time. I mean, you're right. Mason's book, it's in there all the time. I get into it in *Digital Minimalism*, all the different famous thinkers that walk and why they walk. There's this the great book by the French philosopher Frederic Gros called *Philosophy of Walking* that is available in translation and I talk a lot about it in the book.

It's sitting on a train, riding a bike, running, being in a boat, any other activity you can think of, somehow it's not the same. It doesn't show up with nearly the same frequency. I can't find yet research about why that is, like what's the biological explanation. I think a primal explanation almost certainly has to be right, that is we spent so much of our early ancestral history walking.

That's what we did. We were walking across the savanna. That's the only place we could get places. We're a migratory species. We were constantly walking.

There has to be something primal in there that it unlocks something. All right, we're made to be – sometimes we're [inaudible 0:41:21.8] or maybe spend a lot of time walking. My theory, my folk neuroscience, so this is entirely conjecture, is that walking uses up enough of your brain, so the part to your brain that is needed to actually do all the timing and all the physical movement that it could quiet some of the noise.

It gives your brain enough activity to focus on that it could quiet the static and the noise, so the parts that could do the deeper thinking, in some sense almost like they have a clear channel to work on. I have no idea if that's true, but that's the operating neuro-scientific metaphor that I often have in mind when I'm thinking about why that type of movement allows me to think clearer than if for example I'm just sitting completely still.

[0:42:00.7] AVH: Yeah, it makes sense. Folk neuroscience. I like that. That's one I could get behind. I love the example you used too about the Amish, like what we can learn from that. Before anybody listening is like, "All right, let's not get too crazy here." It was interesting when I was reading the article – they don't eschew technology completely, but they really try to make use of stuff that can benefit the community and bring it together, rather than the opposite.

When someone wants to suggest a new technology in the community, they let them try it for a certain amount of time, but the rest of the community watches and observes to see how it works and how the person's using it. I thought that was really interesting.

[0:42:41.5] CN: Yeah. Well, people often misunderstand the Amish, because there's this notion that they froze their technology at some point. Whenever, the late 18th century at some point they said, "Okay, this is as good as it's going to get. Nothing new."

I mean, that's the folk understanding of the Amish. That's not at all what they did. As you've noted, they don't have any particular set rule about technology after this point is bad, or something like that. In fact, if you actually spend time among the Amish, you're often really surprised by what you see.

I mean, I tell accounts of Amish kids come rollerblading by. Amish parents use disposable diapers, chemical fertilizers. There's lots of solar panels and diesel generators are quite common, but it's not like the – there's no way that this technology is frozen. Amish entrepreneurs have websites. This idea that the technology –

[0:43:28.4] AVH: That's something people wouldn't know, right? I thought that was hilarious.

[0:43:33.2] CN: They have someone else manage it, but they have websites to sell their products. I talked about a Mennonite family, which is on the obvious spectrum, it's complicated, but essentially Amish, that has a really complicated computer ICNC router machine — this idea that they're not usually technology is not true.

As you mentioned, like what's really going on is they have this clear value. For the Amish order, it's all about community. They just work backwards. That's the main thing. The community has to be strong. Every new technology that might be relevant to us, we assess it against that value. Does it make our community stronger? Does it make the community weaker? That's all we care about, right? Not if it's digital or not, or new or old.

This is why rollerblade, sure. Rollerblades are going to make our community weaker, but cars, cars were a big deal and they tested out cars early in the 20th century. This was an issue, because people would leave and go other places and that weakened the community. No cars. That was a big deal. They'll have phones, but only at a communal phone booth. It's useful to have a phone. They need to call in orders and stuff like this, but if the phones are in the house, people aren't going to leave to go visit their neighbors and the community is going to be diminished.

A disposable diaper on the other hand, yeah sure, that's easier, right? Why not? That's not going to hurt the community. The reason why I think their example is useful is not that we should follow the same value system they have, but just that it points out a deeper principle, which is the value they get out of being very intentional.

In this case, the very intentional that community support it, trumps the value they lose to inconvenience. That being intentional itself is so powerful that it could overcome the negatives of the sacrifices it requires. The fact that they don't have cars, they don't have cellphones and all these other things that makes life more difficult, the intentionality trumps convenience.

We know it does, because this order still exists, which is crazy, right? It's not like they're on an island somewhere and don't know about modern technology. They're in central Pennsylvania. There's Walmarks two miles from where they live. Every one of the old Amish order spends at least one year during Rumspringa period where they go and live among standard society to see what it's like.

The fact that they still exist is amazing. What it underscores is intentionality is very, very powerful. That's one of the key underpinnings of minimalism in general. Minimalism says less is more. Focus on a few things that are really powerful and ignore the other things that are less valuable and you're going to be happier.

This is part of the explanation for why that's true. It's just the very fact that you're starting to be very intentional about let's say your digital life, you're going to get so much positivity from taking back control of that that it could swap out the little losses of values, or the little inconveniences that this intentionality is going to induce.

[0:46:19.7] AVH: Yes. Yeah. Okay. On that note, I want to get more into the part of the book that's talking about how to really enact this in your own personal life, because I think it's again worth noting. We've talked about it that the intentionality, the mindfulness is really the key here, more so than what you should and shouldn't cut out of your life.

But that it does take a real conscious effort and that's something that you really have to work on and it isn't going to come easy. That's why you recommend this 30-day detox, where you get rid of any of the technology or social media that isn't absolutely necessary.

I do want to get into that, because I think it's different than say to bring it back again to my audience like the Whole 30, the 30 days where you cut certain crappy foods out of your life and then you can look at bringing stuff back more mindfully at the end of the month. It's trickier with

stuff like social media, because it's stuff that you may still maybe need for professional purposes, or because it's just so quick and easy, you're probably not going to get rid of your smartphone for that month, so how do you decide what is the stuff that you really need, versus the stuff that's just fun or mildly convenient, or whatever?

I'd love for you to get into some of those recommendations in terms of if we're ready to do this, this 30-day process, how you go about really putting that in place.

[0:47:44.0] CN: Right. Yeah, these details are very important. It sounds like your audience is going to understand the general idea here really well. It is basically Whole 30 for your digital life, right? Cut everything out and then only very carefully add back things that give you the big wins and avoid the other things. It's starting from scratch, except for now instead of resetting your diet, you're resetting your digital life.

Instead of trying to pick things off from the top, like well, let me just tweak my Facebook habits and now let me think about Instagram, maybe I don't want to use that as much. You just had to clear everything out.

Now let me rebuild from scratch, just the stuff that gives me a lot of value. As you said, the details are more complicated than it is with diet, because it's easy to say, "I'm not going to eat grain," but it's not so easy to say, "I'm not going to use the internet," because you need it for your job, you need it for other things.

I've run a bunch of experiments and cultivated last year when I had over 1,600 people go through this process. I've learned a lot from what works, what doesn't, what are the hidden issues. Here's a couple heuristics that seem useful when you're preparing to do this digital declutter, your digital Whole 30 as it were.

I'm focusing on your personal digital life, so not work. You can't use me as an excuse to stop answering your boss's emails, unfortunately, for a month. You could try it, but I'm not going to back you up. We're talking about your personal life. What's going on with technology in your professional life is a huge issue. It's something I've written about. It's something I'll be writing more about, but it's a bit of a separate issue.

Now within your personal life, we're looking at digital technologies that have some connection to the internet or the network. What you're looking to eliminate during the 30-day period are what I call optional personal technologies.

By optional, I mean if you stop using them, nothing really bad is going to happen. A lot of people, the line here was a little bit fuzzy, but if someone says, "I need text messages, because this is how my daughter tells me she's ready to be picked up from school after sports practice." That's not optional. A bad thing would happen if you stopped using text messages. You wouldn't see your daughter for a month. She'd be stuck at school, right? That's an issue.

On the other hand, I've had people say, "Well, this is how I stay in touch with some people I know, some friends I had maybe from an exchange program who live in a different country." Well, that's a little bit more borderline. We're talking 30 days. Actually, it's probably okay that maybe you have to get in touch with them. Maybe you don't talk to them for 30 days, you're going to have to maybe put a little bit more energy to get in touch with them. That's okay, right?

If something really bad is not going to happen, then it's optional. Did you take the things that don't pass that test? Like the text messaging, or maybe there's some social media you have to do for your work. What you do for those type of technologies is that you put in place rules. You say, "Okay, what I want to do is put in place a rule for how, when and where I use this technology during the 30 days, that restricts it down to just these very crucial uses and otherwise, doesn't allow you to use it at all."

For example, almost certainly you would have none of this on your phone. If your work requires you to do some stuff on social media, no reason for it to be on your phone, maybe just keep it on your work computer, maybe make a schedule for when you check it. A lot of people use tools like Freedom, internet blocking tools to actually enforce schedules, so they can't access it, except for in certain pre-scheduled windows.

You use rules to take the stuff that is almost optional, except for there's a couple key uses you can't get away taking a break from it for a month and you use these rules to restrict how you approach them down to just those key uses. It's a combination of things you step away from

completely, plus things that you have very clear specifications for how you're supposed to use it, that gets you as close as possible to not also using it.

Now some of the other feedback I got when I ran this experiment is I didn't think about video games. A lot of the young men in my audience came back and said that absolutely has to be on the list. We know it's not technically a network technology necessarily. You're not necessarily connected to the internet with these things, but it is devouring our time and attention. It's addictive. That has to be in there. I agree with that.

Also streaming media was something a lot of people came back. They said, "I'm spending too much time hitting watch next, watch next, watch next on Netflix, or Hulu, or what have you." This was often something else that people include in their list of technologies. Keep in mind also news, online news or information online as opposed to physical, that was another thing that came up a lot.

During this experiment, if you want news or information, you have a radio you can buy a newspaper. These are the type of things that came up. If you're careful about what you say no about, to have rules about what remains and you have a broad enough definition of what's optional, you could do a pretty good elimination diet, or approximate an elimination diet pretty well for a 30-day period.

[0:52:19.0] AVH: I really like the concept of the clean slate at the end of the month. I think it makes a lot of sense, because when you look at it, like we alluded to earlier in the conversation about how so much of social media and technology and all of these things didn't start out the way that they are currently being used. It happens so gradually that we're often just very unaware of how we're using it, how much time it's wasting.

I think that even those of us who are deeply entrenched in technology, in social media, if we went from nothing, like a simple phone that you can call from to a smartphone with these, sometimes dozens or hundreds of apps that people have, it would be overwhelming and unpleasant for most people.

Most people wouldn't be like, "Yeah, give me all of those crazy, time-wasting apps all at once," if you go from zero to a 100. I think doing that spring cleaning and pairing it back and then starting fresh and as you've said, over and over in the book too, like having that intentionality and mindfulness, where I have this opportunity to really be thoughtful about which pieces I add back in, it just makes good sense.

But it's like a spring-cleaning for your social media, but also for your brain. Allows you to look at it more clearly than if you're just in the middle of it and it's just all over and you're like, "I need all of this and I use it all the time." If you just have that calming period for a while and then can look at it more clearly after a month, you can really see what you "need" and the things that were just wasting your time. I think that's key.

[0:53:49.5] CN: Yeah. Well, I think physical minimalism is the right analogy. If your house is completely cluttered with junk, right, and you know it's a problem, if you then came to me and you're like, "Cal, you're going to be so happy for me. I found the pair of jeans that I really don't wear anymore and I got rid of them." I'd be like, "Well good, but that's not going to solve your problem. Good for you you thought about one thing."

You're like, "Okay, now I'm going to go through my house to see if I could find something else next week that I don't like, then I might get rid of that." You're never going to solve your problem. We know you're probably going to have to do the Marie Kondo thing, take all of it out of your drawers and make stuff earn its way back.

It's the same thing with your digital life. It doesn't work to say, "Let me just look around and try to find something that maybe I don't like and then think about changing it, or getting rid of it one-by-one." That's not going to do it. You got to dump all of the metaphorical clothes onto the metaphorical bed and you got to go through them piece by piece. If you let me be honest, I don't wear this thing that much, or I don't think I would go out and buy this. Maybe I already have this.

I mean, so this is a key idea of minimalism that way predates digital minimalism, which is building up from scratch very intentionally always trumps trying to take the mess you already have and piece by piece try to make it better from the top down.

[0:55:00.4] AVH: Yes. Yeah. I think another thing that you touch on, that you spend quite a bit of time on, it's very important, is when you're going through this process of minimalizing and getting rid of a lot of this wasteful technology and you talked a lot about how – what to do with that time you suddenly have and how to be mindful about that and get the most out of it and how to – I think you talked about cultivating high-quality leisure activities and replacing passive consumption with active learning, or play, or learning skills and things like that.

I think that that's important, because it's one thing to just say, “Well, don't eat the crappy food anymore,” but you have to say, “Well, here's what you should replace it with, or consider replacing it with and why and how that's going to benefit you.”

I think another interesting thing that you talk about, because we're in this world where we all love to pretend, or we're overly busy and talk about how stressed we are and how we don't have any downtime, we never relax and we never sit still, but you talk about in a lot of cases that doing nothing actually is overrated and not really what your brain or your heart really wants, right?

That you're not necessarily replacing this passive social media use with just sitting around doing nothing, or meditating quietly in a chair, but replacing it with really valuable and sometimes high-energy, challenging other activities. Can you get into that a little bit?

[0:56:23.0] CN: Well, it's really crucial. What do you do when you step away from this digital stream that has essentially been your source of entertainment in all of your downtime? This too could be really, really hard, because the type of activities that we actually do crave are usually difficult and they're usually high-energy. The stuff that really gives us fulfillment, the stuff that gives us meaning has a barrier to entry. It requires energy.

You might not feel a spark of motivation to do it. You need high-quality analog leisure. It's not so simple just to stumble into it. This is something I definitely learned during the experiments that I did with people who are going through this process is that a lot of them struggled at first. What do I do with myself now? It's day one of the digital declutter, my phone is emptied off, I really don't know what to do.

There's one young woman who told me that she had become so used to checking information on her phone, as what she did when she had downtime that once the declutter started, she began to obsessively checking the weather app, because it was the only thing left on her phone after she cleared it off that still would deliver new information.

When you hit it, that's all that was left because she took all the other apps off. She's like, "For about 10 days, I could tell you the weather condition in 10 major cities in the world up to the minute, right?" Because that's all she had, right?

It is hard. Then once you actually do the work of getting after it, let's say let me do valuable things, let me do hard things. I want to do something that requires skill. I want to improve skills. I want to take out responsibility. I want to sacrifice for someone else. I want to serve my community or my family, these type of activities that are hard to do as opposed to just sitting there and passively consuming. Once you get over the barrier to entry, they're massively fulfilling.

One of the things I discovered in the experiment is that once people got these high-quality analog leisure activities fixed back in their life, and it took a few weeks to get used to it again, they began to lose their taste for the low-quality digital. Just after you shift over to a paleo primal type diet, give it a month and then go back and try to eat a Snickers bar, you're like, "My God. This thing is sweet. This is weird, right? This is not real food. I have no particular craving for it." They lose their taste for the low-quality digital.

This effect is so strong that a recommendation that I've started making after the book had come out, because I really learned was getting more evidence for this after the manuscript started getting locked in, is that you might even want to consider before you begin a digital declutter, work first on getting the analog hobbies back. Get that stuff back at your life.

Find a couple things that are really meaningful and hard to require skill or sacrifice, responsibility and do it, right? Get after it. Get those things into your life. Because if you have those already, you're going to find that the stepping away from the low quality digital could be less traumatic. You're just going to say, "Okay, whatever. It's not that big of a deal."

This is the key almost to all of this is not just what you move away from, but what you replace it with. Which again, to go back to the very beginning of the interview, I think that's why the book hits you as surprisingly positive is that really what we've forgotten, because we've been distracting ourselves is what it takes to build a good life.

It's hard to ignore that question typically, because what else are you going to do with your time, right? These devices have made it possible to avoid. If we're really going to step away from a life where all of our leisure minutes are just consuming this digital stream, if we really want to step away from it, we have to reengage this timeless question, is what makes a good life good and how do I get after that?

I know, it's a long answer to a short question, but that's really at the fulcrum to success with digital minimalism is yeah, starting over is good. You want to get the junk out of your life. The exciting part is what you rebuild instead.

That's why for example, during the 30 days where you're away from technology, what do I advise people do is in addition to rebuilding these high-quality leisure activities, you reflect and you try to remember, "Okay, what do I really care about? What do I really want to do with my time? What are my values?" You do that reflection, so that when you're done with the 30 days, everything could be seen through that prism. If some tool comes along, you can ask the question, "Is this the best way to boost one of my values, one of the things I really care."

If it's not, get it out of my sight. I don't care. They'll give you some pitch about hey, you never know. You might meet someone. Oh, you never know. This could be fun. I don't care about you never knows. I don't care about missing out on little things. As a minimalist, I care about getting enough time of the things I already know for sure are really valuable.

Once you figured that out, this is what matters, this is what I'm going after with life, this is how I want to spend my time, suddenly all this digital chatter and noise and shiny bubbles, you see them as just an overcrowded toolbox. You say, "Okay, which of these tools is going to help me with the things I care about? Great, I'll grab those out and I don't care about the rest of the clutter in there."

[1:00:59.4] AVH: I love that. I love the idea of what it takes to build a good life, because I think that no matter how busy we are or how accomplished we are or how stressed out we are, there's no one out there who doesn't have something nagging at the back of their brain. Like, "If I had more time, I would love to learn a new instrument, or learn a new language, or write a book, or connect, in-person, with friends or family or whatever."

Like you said, spending time thinking about what exactly I want to do. Even though sometimes it seems like hard work, even connecting family or friends can seem like something that's more of a chore than a positive thing. When you put the effort in and you're mindful and you always feel better after having a more rich experience talking to your cousin about their new baby rather just clicking congratulations on Facebook.

I think you talked about this in *Deep Work*, but you talk about it here too, the idea of batching activities like that, like the person who was always commuting in the car and spending all this time in traffic, so they made a negative into a positive by saying these are my telephone hour, these are my phone hours, right?

"I'm going to be in the car for an hour every day at this time. If you want to call me, or this is when I can call my friends." Some of that again, it goes back to the mindfulness, but this batching time I think is a really valuable tool too.

[1:02:16.5] CN: Yeah. That works well. I mean, I do it at Georgetown as a professor. One of my roles I see is working with students, not just in my classes, but giving advice, giving feedback of what they're working on. I have some thoughts about these things and I really want to engage with the student body. I have these office hours. They're open and they're the same time every week.

When students come into my orbit, maybe through email or they grab me in the hallway or have this question, or could I ask you about this? I could say, "Yeah, it's easy. This is the time. Whatever you want. Whenever you want. Whatever week that you want to, you can always come by. You're always welcome."

Now I don't have to – it would be impossible to try to set up bespoke appointments with each of these individual students. I don't really have the time for — there's too much barrier to entry, but this allows me to have face-to-face interaction with hundreds of students. I really like those type of hacks, that you could put these type of things in place to make it easier to do the hard stuff. Technology can help with this too.

You could use online scheduling software, so it's easy for people that you want to meet with to setup meetings, whatever it is. It's not technology versus not technology, but the valuable stuff is hard. These type of hacks that make it easier to do the valuable stuff really does go a long way.

[1:03:23.1] AVH: When the 30 days is over and I agree with what you said before about when you can get some of these things out of your life for certain amount of time, your desire for them goes down. And when you aren't eating junk food for a month, it's a lot easier to say no to it and to not really feel that call that you do when it's in your life all the time.

I mean, we all know that things like junk food and social media are created to pull you back in and to be just so hyper palatable and that immediate dopamine hit and all of those things and the fear of missing out that so many people have when they're connected to social media.

Even if that 30 days is deeply rewarding and you get a lot out of it and you feel clearer and better and all of these things, it can still be a very strong siren call to get back to it when the 30 days is over. I speak from experience having done very strict diets or whatever, but it can be very easy to slide back and be like, “Oh, well the 30 days is over, so I'm diving right back into that.”

What are some advice that you have for how to mindfully craft our digital life from scratch once that 30 days is over and not to just mindlessly be like, “Okay, well I feel better. I'm just going to dive back into it and see what I've missed.” What are some ways that we can really take advantage of this clarity that we have at the end of the 30 days?

[1:04:45.5] CN: Well, the issue you talk about with respect to sliding back is why I've been so confused and also a critic of a lot of the modern digital detox suggestions. There's this idea out here. You see it a lot like, “Oh, you need a digital detox.” Which means you take a break a

weekend, a week, or a month away from technology and then you go back to what you're using before.

That always confuse me. I said, "I don't know. I need to go back to my dictionary, but I don't know if this is really the right use of the word detox, because I think this came out of substance abuse treatment." I don't believe the idea was okay, I've got this great plan to help you with your alcoholism. We're going to take a month where you don't drink and then you'll feel better.

Then of course after that month is over, you can go back to drinking like you did before. That's ludicrous, right? I mean, the whole point of a detox if you look at its original use is you reduce the cravings for something as the foundation for the building a new life, a life that doesn't include it. This is why I've been so confused about the modern advice like well, if you just take breaks from something that's caused you trouble and they go back to it again that you'll be fine. I think that's been frustrating.

Yeah, so let's get to your question. How do you get away from this detox model and get instead to the declutter model I talked about, where you're actually removing things for good. Well, for the mindset level, the way you describe is the right way to think about it. You're building a new life from scratch, you're not taking a break, so that's crucial. You're not taking a break, you're wiping the slate clean and you're going to rebuild from scratch. That mindset is crucial.

More practically, how do you do this rebuilding from scratch? Well, I have a screen in the book, so it's essentially a flowchart of questions you go through, but I could give you the simplified version here. Let's say there's some new technology you're considering. The first question you ask is, "Is this the best way to use technology to aid one of those small number of things I identified during the declutter as a core value?" Right?

We mentioned during the declutter, you figure out these are what valuable to me, this is how I want to spend my time. Write them down, you have them, there's four or five, you could look at them every day. When it comes time to reintroduce, you say, "Okay, those are things that matter. Is this the best way to use technology to boost this?" Not, "Would this give me some benefit for one of my core values?"

Everything could give you some benefit, but is this the thing I'm going to take from the world of all these tools that's going to give you the best benefit? If the answer is no, then you say, "Okay, I don't care." If the answer is yes, then you go to the second question, which says okay, if this technology is going to give me a huge boost to something I value, what are my rules for how when I use it? You would never just stick with the binary decision of I use this technology, or I don't use technology. You also would say, "How and when am I going to use it," right?

Let's use Instagram for an example, right? When I think about Instagram as a theoretician and writer I say, "Okay, of the things I value, is this the best technology to help any of them?" For me, the answer is no. I'm sure there's some benefits for me being on Instagram, but there's no way for me to make the case that this is the best technology for the things I really care about.

Let's use another example like an artist, because I met several artists while I was researching this book. For whom their answer for Instagram would be yes, because it turns out they really value creating original art. To create original art requires creativity. If you talk to professional artists, they say the key to creativity is you have to keep priming the pump by exposing yourself to cutting-edge, very interesting avant-garde work. You have to expose yourself to stimuli, which could then be reconfigured to be your own insights.

For a lot of professional artists, following the works in progress of other artists on Instagram is really the best way for them to leverage technology, to aid this thing they value, which is being creative and producing new things that are innovative and good. They would pass the first question in a way that I wouldn't for Instagram.

Then they would go to the second question. Okay, how and when am I going to use Instagram to boost this value? The artists I talked with after they went through this process almost always have the same answer, which was A, aggressively curate who I follow down to five to 10 of the artists whose work is most inspiring to me. Get rid of everything else. It's not a social platform.

Two, take it off the phone. There's nothing about using this as a source of inspiration that means that you need to see it while you're bored or waiting in line or when your friend goes to the bathroom at the bar. Take it off the phone. Three, have a schedule. This is my Sunday ritual. I

take an hour and I go through my feed of the six artists I care and I see what they've done and it's a source of inspiration.

That's classic digital minimalism right there, right? You only care about the technologies to give you a big win and then you structure how you use them, so that you take the cost-benefit ratio and just move it massively in your advantage.

[1:09:28.8] AVH: Yeah. I'm conscious of the time here. I know I can probably keep you for a lot longer, but I won't do that to you. I feel we've covered a lot about the book and just enough that I think people who are feeling the way I and I know probably everybody else in the world is feeling about social media and their smartphones and that is the word that you use that unease, that feeling like, "I need this and I think that it's valuable, but I'm not sure that I'm really using this to the best of my benefit."

That's where so much of the value in this new book lies is that it's not telling you technology and social media and everything is across the board terrible. I think that most of us would agree that there's plenty to be gained from the technology that we have access to and that we can use it to make our lives even better and even more fulfilled and even more convenient, but that we need to be mindful and we need to be smart and put some work into how we use it and how we use it to better our lives, instead of just wasting it.

I really, really appreciate you taking the time to go over some of this with us and to tease just enough, but I think our listeners are definitely going to want to read this book and see what else they can get from it.

I have to say at one point, there was one chapter where somebody was talking about at the very least, you can get off your phone, you can feel a little bit smug about it and I have to say I'm in the subway here in New York and I'm reading this *Digital Minimalism* book next to five people who are playing video games on their cellphone and I'm like, "I do feel a little bit smug. I feel good about it."

At the very least, you can get that out of reading *Digital Minimalism*, which I think is great.

[1:11:05.0] **CN:** Yeah. What else do you need?

[1:11:05.9] **AVH:** A little bit of smugness never hurt anybody, right?

[1:11:07.9] **CN:** The problem is you can't – what good is smugness if you can't post about it on social media?

[1:11:12.1] **AVH:** Right. Well yeah, therein lies the problem. I think I'm okay with it. Hey, you have another – are you working on another book right now? This one isn't even officially out yet, I don't think as of this recording, but you have another one that you're working on.

[1:11:24.7] **CN:** Yeah, so I'm in the early stages of a new book that goes back to the business space and it's tentatively titled *A World Without Email*. It takes a real critical look at the way that we're working right now, in knowledge work, where we base everything on these ongoing unstructured communication.

That's going to argue that's a terrible way to work. It runs completely contrary to the neuroscience of how our brain produces value and that the future is going to look very different. You look at the office of the future, you're not going to see people sitting there with inboxes open just sending messages back and forth all day.

[1:11:57.9] **AVH:** Yeah. I still think it's – even somebody who is deeply entrenched in this world as I am, I still think it's crazy I don't work in a typical office environment anymore, but when I did that people would just send emails back and forth to the person sitting in the cubicle right next to them and it's like, "What a time to be alive." It's crazy. It's crazy.

[1:12:15.6] **CN:** Interesting from a paleo perspective, so when we talk about *Digital Minimalism*, it's getting back to ancestral ways of living, right? Connecting and finding value. It's actually the ancestral instincts that I think got us into trouble in the modern workplace, because our instinct is okay, how do you coordinate?

Well, throughout our ancestral history, it's usually three or four of us try to do something, like three or four of us are trying to hunt a mastodon or something like this. The most effective way

to coordinate let's say a group of three or four, friends [inaudible 1:12:45.6] or whatever that are trying to catch a mastodon is you just have unstructured conversation, right?.

It's you go over there, okay you loop around this way, I'm going to throw the sphere from the top, right? Just everyone keeps up with what everyone else is doing. It's unstructured, you communicate, you figure it out on the fly. We're actually very good at that. That's our instinct. The problem is and I think what got us in trouble in the modern workplace is that we then tried to scale up that paleolithic instinct, we tried to scale that up to large organizations.

We're trying to replicate that same three-person hunting the mastodon, unstructured conversation in a company of 500 people, or 15,000 people. Instead of it just being us around the campfire, it's us around the email server. It turns out that once you get about above, let's say four or five people, that way of coordinating doesn't work anymore. You have to have much more structure. It's okay if five people are hunting the mastodon, but if you have 1,500 people hunting the mastodon, you're going to need more structure, right? The military figured this out a long time ago.

We think we're being really futuristic in the modern workplace because we have our Slack channels open, or we're sending emails from our smartphones underneath subway tunnels, but we're not being futuristic, we're being paleolithic. We're actually taking our instincts for how we should coordinate and we're trying to scale them up to our modern businesses. It turns out it doesn't work, because if you have to try to monitor a conversation among hundreds of people, that makes your brain have to constantly switch context. If your brain has to constantly switch context, it can't actually think it produced the value, which is the whole point of the company in the first place.

It's a little bit of an aside, but it's ironic that digital minimalism, our ancestral instincts are going to help us make our lives better. In the workplace, it's actually our ancestral instincts that led us to this place where we're all just in this reducto-ad-absurdum conclusion where we just send messages all day about the work, instead of actually doing anything.

[1:14:28.2] AVH: So interesting. I mean, I love technology, but I like the idea of a world without email. I am definitely looking forward to that book. In the mean time, I think everyone who's

listening should read *Digital Minimalism*, whether you're thinking about doing a detox, whether you think you're already on top of it or not, I think just the information in this book, the positivity, the inspiration even for me thinking about all the things that it's just a reminder of what I want to get out of my life and how I can go about doing that in a more structured way.

If you want to write a bunch of books like Cal, just get off Facebook. That's my message for the end of this podcast. Get off Facebook and write a book. No, but listen, Cal thank you so much for taking the time. Thank you for your efforts. Thank you for these books that I think are hugely, hugely valuable and relevant today. I appreciate it so much and I look forward to the next one.

[1:15:18.5] CN: Of course, it was my pleasure.

[1:15:19.6] AVH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:15:25.1] AVH: All right, everyone. Thank you for listening. Thanks for taking the time. I hope you got as much out of this as I did. Definitely go get that book. I promise you it's worth it. I'm going to make everyone I know read it. It's entertaining, it's hopeful, it's useful.

I mean, is anyone else in love with the idea of those mouse books, the ones that are like the size of a smartphone? I love that. I'm totally getting some. I always carry a book with me everywhere I go and honestly sometimes, it does get a bit heavy. I know that's hashtag fitness, but sometimes it's annoying. If I have a little mini book the size of the iPhone, that's so cute.

Anyway, thanks again to our fantastic sponsor, the maker of delicious, slow-simmered and organic bone broths, use the code [onlybones](#) at check out when you go to [bonafideprovisions.com](#) and try some of their delicious and healthy and warming bone broths and bone broth-based soups.

All right, so sticking with the food theme, next week we're going to have an interesting conversation on the podcast about a battle of the spices. I don't know if you guys are aware about this legal issue around Primal Palate. They make very healthy paleo-friendly organic

spices. They created this new spice, it was actually very popular called New Bay and the maker of Old Bay seasoning, which you've probably heard of. The owner is McCormick. They are suing them for copyright infringement, which I don't know, I guess I should reserve my judgment at least until next week. It's an interesting story, but I'm interested to hear your take on it.

Make sure you subscribe to Paleo Magazine Radio on iTunes, have a listen, let me know what you think about the situation. You can also read an article that I wrote about it online at paleomagazine.com. You can go check that out for free right now and get brought up to speed.

As always, send us a message on social media at Paleo Magazine, or me personally on Instagram @themusclemaven if you have any questions or comments or suggestions. Thanks again and have a great week.

[OUTRO]

[1:17:11.9] AVH: The intro music for Paleo Magazine Radio is a song called Stronger performed by Alter Ego and I hope you love it.

[END]