

# Some Links To Life

A collection of important  
essays from [A Writer's Notepad](#)

by Joseph Ratliff

## Introduction

As with my other [Manifestos](#), [reports](#), and [collections](#)... this one comes from a randomly inspired event.

I decided to reflect on the number of posts from my Tumblr blog titled *A Writer's Notepad*.

From there I've assembled what are, in my opinion, the best of the posts I've written there. These are their stories..

### **Dong! Dong!**

Er, I mean this is that collection.

As with most of my writing, I don't sugar coat anything, so this isn't some warm, fluffy collection of clouds that are designed to "enlighten" you into believing the Universe will provide all if all you do is sit there and think about it.

No, these essays are written to challenge you and your thinking. They cover culture, technology, and even some self-helpish types of topics.

I hope you enjoy the read, but more importantly, I hope you **do** something with what you're about to read. We don't need more people who let digital books gather dust on their hard drive.

We are in severe shortage of people who want to abuse, manipulate, mold, and alter the status quo.

Is that you? Let's see...

## **Do You Have A Can Of Tom Thumb In Your Cupboard?**

I do.

What is "Tom Thumb?"

Good thing you asked...

This is a can of pork and beans that I have had for a long time in my soup cupboard. The brand name is a generic one...Tom Thumb.

### **Alright...so why this post about Tom Thumb?**

It is a lesson in humility that we all need from time to time. In my case, there was a time a little over 15 years ago...when life was not this great...definitely not as good as it is now.

One night, myself and my family started to run low on food.

### **And out came Tom Thumb.**

That can, plus a loaf of bread, was about all we had to eat that night. It was a pretty sad situation. But...that moment made me realize something...

*"Holy smokes, I need to go out and do something about this."*

Why was I in this situation?

Well, a couple of months prior to that moment, I had gotten laid off from a car dealership where I worked the parts counter. We had some savings to get by (very little), but at this moment, we were way past draining them.

### **We were literally moments away from having to get on the food line.**

But this was my first lesson in success as well. I felt this gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach, a "pulling feeling" in my chest, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't look my family in the face and say:

*"We are going hungry tonight."*

So I didn't let that happen.

I had, up until that moment, had some setbacks in getting another job to support my family.

But staring Tom Thumb in the face made me reach deep down and "suck it up." The feeling I had inside of me now was one of invincibility...I could not be stopped...

I got a job the next morning...walked in the office...sat down for an interview...and did not leave until we were filling out new hire paperwork.

From that moment on, we have never faced that type of adversity in our lives again. As a matter of fact, life is filled with a richness I cannot describe, only feel.

It is the end of 2012 now and since that moment 15 or so years ago... we are completely humble and Tom Thumb still resides in our cupboard (we had to eat the original Tom Thumb, so we bought another).

Tom Thumb is still in our cupboard to remind us of that humbling moment...and I vowed to never allow him to the front of our cupboard again.

To this day, he is still hiding there in the back...reminding me that there was a time when it wasn't this good...

Which motivates me to help others reach their goals...and so that along the way I will reach mine too.

It has worked for me, to a very successful degree, so far.

**Do you have a can of Tom Thumb in your cupboard?**

## On Minimalism

I've been asked... *"Joe, what is minimalism to you?"*

Here is the beginning of that answer (it's a DEEP subject)...

- **It's a mindset.** You begin to think deeply about your life, the impact your life has on others, and how you can contribute. This, in addition to the traditional "less than 100 things" mindset for extreme minimalists (of which, I am **not**).
- **It's a set of guiding beliefs.** Minimalism isn't "something you do," it's a lifestyle choice. Much like diets... it won't work unless you totally commit to it.
- **It provides "relief" when you commit to it.** You will, no doubt, feel very differently once you commit to the lifestyle choice it represents. I felt relief, because I no longer had to "buy stuff" just to feel good... instead I just felt good because I didn't have to maintain and worry about stuff.
- **It's more than "stuff."** Reducing the number of things you own is only one very small part of minimalism. Minimalism translates into other parts of your life, how you spend money, determining how much you need, reducing your carbon footprint, creativity, the environment and others.

And on, and on.

As you can see from this short post... minimalism is much more than just "living with less than 100 things," which quite frankly, is an extreme minimalist mindset. I'm not comfortable with that currently.

What I have done is reduce (drastically) the number of items I own, giving away or selling my excess stuff that I felt I had to "keep" at one point... and no longer feel I need.

I think differently about my impact on the world.

I think differently about how I interact with others.

In short... I think the idea of minimalism made me think differently overall.

Could it do the same for you? Who knows?

Start today with this website <http://mnmlist.com> (Leo Babauta on minimalism) and work from there. If you continue exploring, you'll run into the resources you need to decide.

## More On Minimalism

I received a few emails, and some responses to my [first post on minimalism](#)... so I'm going to add a bit on the topic going forward.

*(no, this won't be another minimalist blog, at least that's not my intention, but I'm open to feedback of course)*

I've noticed that there are a few misconceptions about minimalism as a lifestyle choice. Most of these misconceptions seem to come from some "rules" about minimalism.

Let's just clear the deck here... there are NO rules you have to follow when choosing to live as a minimalist. There isn't a nice little box labeled "minimalism" where you can open the top and discover everything about the topic.

**It means different things to different people... because we are all, well, different right?**

For example... personally, I do NOT have less than 100 things... I haven't (yet) cut the cable, and I DO own a car.

I do watch very little TV, I only drive where I **have** to (I ride a bike or walk elsewhere)... and I've cut back boxes and boxes of my "stuff" that I don't use and have given most of it to Goodwill (I probably have less than about 800 things, but working on it).

I buy locally grown food from our farmer's market, eat healthy, walk 3 miles every day with my wife at exercise pace, drink plenty of water etc...

I manage my time very well, answer email once a day (if that), don't have a "smart phone," enjoy nature... etc...

These are the easiest examples of how there aren't "rules" I have to follow to follow this lifestyle choice.

**You DON'T have to follow any of them.**

If you just go through your closet, and pull out 10 things right after reading this post and send them to the Goodwill, and don't replace them... you've made a choice like a "minimalist" would.

If you decide to eliminate soda, ice cream, and pie from your diet... you're well on your way.

But there are NO set guidelines, this is a lifestyle... NOT a rulebook.

I'll finish this post here...

**Labels like "minimalist" mean nothing... your lifestyle choices mean everything (to you and no one else).**

If there had to be a "rule" to follow, I'd make it that one.

Until next time. :)

## Are We Becoming "Mindless Drones?"

I'm writing the following post out of a frustration and desire to see our society (mainly in the U.S.) further develop the desire to become deeply self-accountable and self-reliant so we don't have to rely on the Government, corporations, media, or other entities to provide for us in any way.

Also, we would then begin to regain our currently eroding freedom of choice if we didn't have the need to rely on others to make those choices for us.

**NOTE:** I have been guilty of every item I mention in this post at one point or another, I do **not** consider myself perfect, and I am writing this post out of frustration to see something better for society... so please read it as an opportunity to "checkup" your own self-accountability... *not as any insult.*

**Here we go...**

Sometimes I think we just *want* to be "mindless drones" as a society.

Why?

For a variety of reasons, and some of them represent very deep subjects to discuss, which I won't cover in great detail in this one post.

**Let's get started... and a warning, if you're easily offended or can't "look in the mirror" and see the problem, don't read on. This one's NOT going to be a "warm and fuzzy" experience...**

1) We mindlessly consume at a furious pace, buying and using "stuff" for no good reason (*especially in the U.S., commonly referred to as "first world problems"*)... not thinking of the future impact that type of consumption can have on our finances, our environment, etc... sometimes in the interest of one-upping our neighbors, and guess what?

**No one human has EVER been nor will ever be better than another, no matter how much or what type of "stuff," money, or success you have.**

In fact, I would challenge you might be compensating for some other shortcoming if you fall into the camp of always trying to "beat the Joneses."

Of course, it's a free country, and you're entitled to keep doing this, but that **doesn't** excuse the fact you still could be a large part of a bigger problem down the road.

**2) We mindlessly blame others, or our circumstances, our lack of resources etc... for our various shortcomings in life.**

There is only one person who is accountable for where you are in life, what success you have (or don't have), and how much income you make etc... YOU.

No one else, no other person, set of circumstances, lack of resources etc... are at fault for [where you're at](#) in life.

Only **you** are accountable for your results.

The government isn't going to bail you out, and yes, now our government is controlled by corporate interests for the most part, which means the government, and those corporate interests, do NOT always have your best interests at heart.

**Get over it.**

Create your own circumstances, find your resources, and don't be lazy enough to stop short of everything you want to accomplish.

It would be great if we could all have everything handed to us on a plate, a gold plate, but that isn't going to happen. So you have to pick something and get REALLY good at it, you have to say "no" to certain opportunities that might cross your path while you're getting really good at something.

You will get bumps and bruises along the way, **every** time, but you have to get up and go at it again. That, or become a mindless drone. Either way, the choice is yours and no one else's, with the positive or negative consequences of that choice.

**3) Generally, the mainstream media does NOT have your best interest at heart.** These companies are "for profit" companies, interested in "getting eyeballs" for advertisers, and sometimes selling those eyeballs (the data) to those advertisers.

That is their mission, period.

So, everything you're seeing on the news is NOT necessarily 100% true or accurate, and is mostly biased opinion. In fact, I would challenge you, even you older folks who watch the news media every day, to stop watching altogether.

**This applies to online media as well so...** while challenging, consume only enough of the "online media," all with a grain of salt, to help understand your position on a topic... but never more.

Bottom line, the consumption of media (which includes information of any type) **has** to be kept in moderation, or we risk being turned into mindless drones, and operating our lives only by the media we consume.

This also applies to the use of technology, but that's for a different post... if you want to read more about this, please [download my "manifesto."](#)

**4) Your health, you NEED to focus on it starting now and continue doing so for the rest of your life (especially in the U.S., where obesity is becoming the disgusting norm instead of the exception).**

I only realized the true depth of the importance of this in late 2010, and I'm fucking pissed that it took me that long to realize it.

**Folks, processed "food" items like soda, ice cream, pies, candy etc.. are NOT good for you, and you should STOP eating them 100%, starting today.**

In fact, these nasty creations of the food industry are probably at fault for more of the obesity problem we have in the U.S. than anything else. That of course is just an educated guess, but I'll bet it's true.

Here's the sad part, *most* of the people who read the advice above will do NOTHING with it, I didn't either until late 2010, and these people **will** suffer the consequences... then blame some outside circumstances as to why they remain fat, out of shape, etc... THEN, even worse, they will continue this destructive pattern until their premature death from circumstances they could have controlled easily.

BTW, see [this post by Leo Babauta of Zen Habits](#) if you're using excuses to not get fit.

**NOTE:** There are a few individuals who have *documented* medical conditions which cause other diseases like diabetes, obesity, etc... those people are the **exception**, not the rule in this case.

Most people are perfectly capable of changing their circumstances if they are willing to make it their lifestyle.

**Another key here, you have to be willing to make your "good health" your lifestyle... not just try to address it with some fad diet or exercise program.**

When you are fit, when you eat well and take care of yourself, it becomes **who** you are... NOT some pie in the sky, one-time fix. You won't eat or drink the "bad stuff" any longer, because it isn't a part of your life.

But sometimes, when I observe people, I get the feeling they would rather meander mindlessly throughout life (*like, well, mindless drones*) than make the changes necessary to improve themselves... and that my friends, is a really sad state of affairs.

A state of affairs that needs to be corrected, or we can just give up and all become mindless drones as a society. Hey, it's a free country, anyone can do exactly what they want, along with all the positive and negative consequences that come with it.

Bottom line, the choice remains ours... but it's one or the other, black and white, because it's one life choice or the other.

**And I think, as a society, we are most certainly better than who we are now, way better in fact... and that is my main frustration from which I write this.**

In **none** of the items above am I talking about major, world-changing shifts or "success-guru" type of stuff. It's more about self-accountability, more about wanting to improve ourselves...

...and less about reducing ourselves to becoming mindless drones... meandering about, consuming, blaming, trolling, spamming, harming, restricting, not thinking, etc...

To me, learning the lessons that I have over the last couple of decades or so, it's becoming more and more about common sense and self-accountability. *I just wish common sense was more common.* **Can it be?** I think so. :)

## Important Questions About Society Going Forward...

The more dependent we are on government to provide basic necessities like money, shelter, Social Security (read: retirement), etc... the less real freedoms we have.

So I have some real questions about this "Government Gerbil Feeder" we've been living on for decades... and perhaps it's time for a change.

Here we go...

**What if we didn't need Social Security and instead made our own way?**

I know, if we didn't have Social Security, how would older folks be able to live, right? Most people don't retire with any money in their bank accounts, and have almost nothing to live on unless they get that monthly check... I get it.

But isn't that our fault to begin with?

**Shouldn't we have saved money, or invested it, instead of consuming at such an enormous rate that it put us into enormous debt in the first place?** That's what the wealthy do, so shouldn't we all try to become wealthy ourselves?

Shouldn't we quit trying to blame outside circumstances beyond our control, and instead be accountable to ourselves to solve the challenges we face? Don't we have the very same opportunity as everybody else to succeed doing this?

Then why do we keep blaming those circumstances and keep having to depend on the Government to provide the table scraps it's providing to be able to live?

Why settle for minimum wage jobs? Why not create and ship your expertise to the world?

Everybody has *something*, something that no one else is gifted with... and now we have [every tool imaginable](#) cheaper than ever thought possible to be able to carry our dreams out... so why not use them and do just that?

Why not do this... and quit worrying about whether or not our next unemployment check (or social security check) is even coming? We don't have to worry about it if we change our

circumstances... and heck, that could shift the tide in our favor... **instead** of relying on the Government to provide for us.

I ask these questions (and trust me, I have WAY more)... because I think that in order to make our country (the United States of America) a better one for future generations... we need to change the way Government is interacting with us. Not just talk about it, not just have political debates about it, **actually do something about it.**

And trust me, I know that won't be easy.

Why?

**Because I've been there...**

I've been on Government entitlement programs (early in life), I've been on unemployment, and I've even received food stamps. I know what it means to have to look for my next meal, I know what it means to have to painstakingly look for a job (until I discovered that wasn't the best idea either).

I also realized in 2001 that I have to quit settling for the table scraps the Government is offering, and I've also realized you can live enjoyably on a LOT less than society demands you do (e.g. you really DON'T have to have all that stuff you currently have).

**But enough about me, this is about us.**

The most important question I have is...

*What happens when we don't need the Government to provide for us anymore?*

Instead, what if we only need them to do the REAL job they were put in place to do... to **Govern?**

**There are two definitions of the word "govern":**

**gov·ern/ 'gəvərn/**

Verb:

1. Conduct the policy, actions, and affairs of (a state, organization, or people).
2. Control, influence, or regulate (a person, action, or course of events).

**What if we held the Government accountable for #1... and quit allowing them to do so much of #2 (a *small* amount of #2 is necessary)?**

**Think about this today.**

## **Are We Not Capable Of Living Up To The Standard?**

I'm hearing a lot of this...

*"Yeah right, that would be great in an **ideal world**."*

... or some variation of it.

I totally understand this does not represent everybody's feeling... a number of people think we can accomplish great things as a society, and as a human race.

But for those who think it's not possible to profit as a company unless you are open on Thanksgiving and Christmas... or think we are not capable of operating businesses with a "people first" culture... that those two concepts, and others, are reserved for "an ideal world" and not the current one we live in...

### **Are we not capable of living up to the higher standard?**

I think we are, we just have to get over ourselves, then get out of our own way and just do it. More on this topic later.

## Nobody Controls The Bits

The Internet wasn't meant to be "controlled" by anyone.

Your information is yours, both from a privacy standpoint, AND from a responsibility standpoint.

It's NOT Facebook's responsibility to monitor WHAT information you share, it's also not it's responsibility to determine what information OF YOURS gets shared.

(re-read the above several times, let that sink in)

But forget Facebook, they are just one of the "big" points where all of this happens... Verizon, Google, AT&T, etc... all want some measure of "control"... but NONE of them should get it... rather, **they should participate in the sharing of bits.**

Your information, is your information... but don't expect or **let** anyone or any entity to use your information the way THEY see fit. In order to accomplish this, you have to understand that when you use a "free" site on the Web, you are bargaining that information (your information) in exchange for use of that site.

**Folks, we need to change "the bargain," and our strongest vote is accepting our responsibility of our information... and where we share it.**

Nobody owns or controls the bits.

## The Illusion Of Social Media

In my last post, I shared my partial [thoughts on privacy and net neutrality](#).

In this one, I'm going to share what I mean by "the illusion of social media."

It's an important topic, but one you won't find a whole bunch of discussion on... unfortunately.

### Here's what I mean by "illusion"...

Social networks and tools like to market themselves as this BIG deal. They aren't. They are a means to an end.

But they won't have any of that... instead they want you to join, for free, and in exchange take the information you supply and sell something against it (for the most part, there are a couple who sell premium versions with no selling against it).

Folks, this is all about the data... your data... period.

Facebook wants your data, and gets it in various ways, then sells it to advertisers, and now to brands (violating an understanding it had with brands).

Is this evil? Should we moan, groan and complain about a company like Facebook (or Twitter, or LinkedIn, etc...) who's business transaction is to sell data to advertisers?

**NO.** Because that's our bargain for using a "free" service/tool under *the illusion* of connecting with each other, transparency, etc... (all big, fat, steaming piles of marketing bullshit btw). We get to give up our data, posts, content, etc... in exchange for using tools that we could not, or do not want to, create ourselves.

So, the illusion these media giants are creating (that's all they are, media giants)... is basically this:

*"Hey, you regular person, we'll let you do all of these cool things with our tools... but we're going to sell your data, in various forms, to other companies for our profits.*

*Once in a while, we'll act like we care about your privacy (we don't), we'll debate about transparency and 'openness on the Internet' and such, but really... we're just interested in selling your eyeballs for money.*

*We're going to show a moderate level of concern for our users, that's you, and our developers, but in the end we're going to change the rules when we feel like it... because hey, our service or tool, it's FREE... right?*

*Oh yeah, and we can develop other income sources too, like having outside developers make themes and tools etc... but if they're relying on us to conduct their sole source of business... well, too bad if we suddenly 'change direction' or even shut down for whatever reason. You should never put all your eggs in one basket."*

That's the illusion. Think about that today.

EDIT 12/16/2012: [Just saw a video](#) by the Onion that humorously addresses my points here.

## The Jar, The Pebbles, The Sand

A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, he wordlessly picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full.. The students responded with a unanimous 'yes.'

The professor then produced two Beers from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed..

'Now,' said the professor as the laughter subsided, 'I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things--your family, your children, your health, your friends and your favorite passions--and if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house and your car.. The sand is everything else--the small stuff.

'If you put the sand into the jar first,' he continued, 'there is no room for the pebbles or the golf balls. The same goes for life.

If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff you will never have room for the things that are important to you.

Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness.

Spend time with your children. Spend time with your parents. Visit with grandparents. Take your spouse out to dinner. Play another 18. There will always be time to clean the house and mow the lawn.

Take care of the golf balls first--the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the Beer represented. The professor smiled and said, 'I'm glad you asked.' The Beer just shows you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of Beers with a friend.

*the above essay is "author unknown" – happy to attribute if somebody knows... [contact me](#) if you happen to have the answer.*

That's it for this collection, "Some Links To Life".

I hope you enjoyed the read, but more importantly, as I mentioned earlier I hope you **do** something with what you learned here.

Because if what I've written here has an impact on one person, it would have been worth it.

And please, feel free to share this report on Twitter, Google+, via Email, or by any other means (like your blog for example, and if you do, link to [this post](#) for trackback).

Until the next time we look in the mirror together,

**Joseph Ratliff**

<http://josephratliff.com/blog>

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