

COURTNEY ELLIS

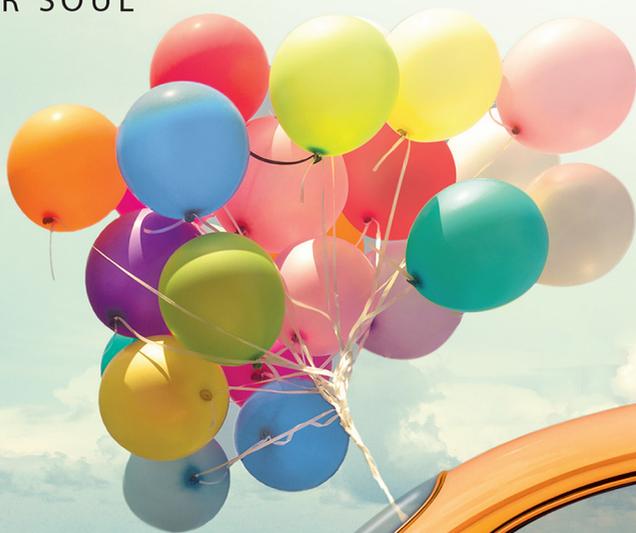


# UNCLUTTERED

**FREE** YOUR SPACE

**FREE** YOUR SCHEDULE

**FREE** YOUR SOUL



*“Peace. Less. Still. Enough. Simple. Clear. Rested. Read Uncluttered.”*

John Ortberg, senior pastor of Menlo Church, and author of *I'd Like You More If You Were More Like Me*

*“Close the computer, put down the smartphone, grab a big cup of coffee and start reading this delightful and disorienting book. With disarming candor, sly humor, and the empathy of the pastor and spiritual counselor that she is, Courtney Ellis has given us a gift and offered us a path. Part intervention, part confession, part coaching, and part hanging-out-with-a-friend-that-makes-you-laugh-too-loud-in-a-restaurant, Ellis offers us a winsome, challenging, instructive, and inspiring engagement for rediscovering the freer, fuller life that all of us are longing for and most of us lost somewhere along the way.”*

Tod Bolsinger, Vice President & Chief of Leadership Formation, Fuller Seminary, and author of *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*

*“Uncluttered is a practical and profound work, tailor-made for this era of noise and busyness. Courtney Ellis wisely and graciously points us to the secret of a fuller life, one that is slower and simpler, yet is more grounded and overflowing with the presence of a good and loving God.”*

Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, Inc.com columnist, and author of *Start, Love, Repeat: How to Stay in Love with Your Entrepreneur in a Crazy Start-up World*

*“Uncluttered by Courtney Ellis is somehow raw, relatable, and hilarious, all at the same time. After reading the sentence, ‘The light of Christ shines in through all of the new spaces created when we eliminate household clutter,’ I dug up nine grocery bags of junk in less than a day—and truly felt a newfound sense of holiness and peace in the simplicity. I can’t recommend her thoughts on decluttering the many different forms of clutter that fill up our lives more highly.”*

Cara Meredith, author of *The Color of Life: A Journey toward Love and Racial Justice*

*“One of the greatest threats to faith in the twenty-first century is distraction. The infinite access and limitless options of our age lead to lives of exhaustion, excess, and a ‘too-muchness’ where faith is just one among many consumer items we try to squeeze in. But this does not lead to flourishing. Key to healthy, sustainable, contagious faith is our commitment to living simpler, quieter, more uncluttered lives. This is the urgent and soul-nourishing message of Uncluttered, a book that should be read by anyone—pastors, parents, students, smartphone addicts—seeking to follow Jesus more attentively in an age of distraction.”*

Brett McCracken, senior editor for the Gospel Coalition, author of *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*

*“In Uncluttered Rev. Courtney Ellis does what our time, image, and productivity obsessed culture tells us is impossible: unplugging from the unnecessary demands of life and instead plugging in to God and relationships that matter. With her profound spirituality, uncommon transparency, and gut-shaking humor (take off your shape wear before reading) she invites us to journey to a simpler, deeper, and stronger relationship with God, family, and work.”*

Nicole Caldwell-Gross, Pastor of Missions and Outreach at St. Luke’s (UMC), and blogger

*“Uncluttered is a funny, nonjudgmental, down-to-earth guide not just for clearing out junk, but for laying hold of freedom in order to perceive God and abide with him. With both humorous stories and ancient spiritual disciplines, Courtney Ellis walks alongside the reader with a true pastor’s heart to discover the riches of an uncluttered life.”*

Aubry G. Smith, author of *Holy Labor: How Childbirth Shapes a Woman’s Soul*

# Uncluttered

Free Your Space,  
Free Your Schedule,  
Free Your Soul

Courtney Ellis

Uncluttered  
Rose Publishing, LLC  
140 Summit Street  
P.O. Box 3473  
Peabody, Massachusetts 01961-3473  
www.hendricksonrose.com

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To Daryl,  
with all my heart



# Contents

## Part I The Freedom of Less

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	3
I MIGHT DIE, BUT AT LEAST WE CAN AFFORD A SECOND CAR	
<b>2. Stuff</b> .....	13
MORE IS MORE, UNLESS IT'S NOT	
<b>3. Clothing</b> .....	29
THE ONE THING MARK ZUCKERBERG AND I HAVE IN COMMON	
<b>4. New Stuff</b> .....	45
STOP SHOP(PING) AND ROLL	
<b>5. Technology</b> .....	59
ELECTRIC HANGOVER	
<b>6. Schedule</b> .....	75
KNOWING NO	

## Part II The Grace of More

<b>7. The Secret of Simplicity</b> .....	107
GOD FIRST	

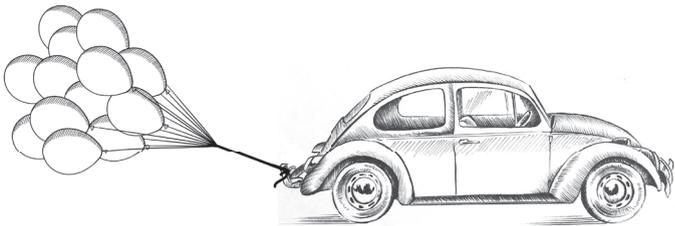
<b>8. Sabbath</b> .....	137
RECEIVING THE GIFT	
<b>9. Hospitality</b> .....	167
HOT DOGS, STRANGERS, AND YOU	
<b>10. Listening and Speaking</b> .....	181
HOLY WHISPERS	
<b>11. Uncluttered Kids</b> .....	195
SIMPLE, SOULFUL PARENTING	
<b>12. Generosity</b> .....	219
FREE THE FINANCES	
<b>13. Worship</b> .....	233
THE ULTIMATE UNCLUTTERED ACT	
<b>14. Conclusion</b> .....	243
LIFE, UNCLUTTERED	
Acknowledgments .....	253
Bibliography .....	255
Notes.....	263

*Why then, can one desire  
too much of a good thing?*

–Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act IV, Scene I



Part I  
**THE FREEDOM OF LESS**





# Introduction

I MIGHT DIE, BUT AT LEAST WE CAN  
AFFORD A SECOND CAR

*We are all of us clinging to something.*

—Scott Cairns, *The End of Suffering*

I sat in the academic building’s hallway, a few doors down from the classroom in which I taught. I stared at the tan carpet, breathing in and out and trying with increasing desperation to will away an impending panic attack.

“Professor Ellis?”

I raised my gaze to the pair of ankle boots standing before me. “Yes?”

“Class started a couple of minutes ago,” she said. One of my students. Hailey.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be right there.” I waited for her to leave, took a few more breaths, and shakily got to my feet, heading down the hall for my final class of the day.

*Get a grip, I told myself. There’s no reason you should be panicking.*

And really, there wasn’t. It was a writing class, not the invasion of Fallujah.

Besides, the rest of my life was much too rosy for panic. In the past year, my husband Daryl and I celebrated the birth of our second son, a finished PhD (his), and a new blog (mine). Our marriage rocked: we were one of those annoying couples who both loved and liked each other. We lived in southern California where it was sunny pretty much every freaking day. We worked alongside each other at a thriving church with a fantastic staff.

So *why* exactly was I having a panic attack in a college hallway?

I confessed my ongoing anxiety to our Bible study small group a few days later. “It’s all just too much,” I told them, three other husband-and-wife duos who’d known me for years. “I’m overwhelmed all the time and it’s all too much and I don’t know how to make it less much.”

“What exactly is too much?” my friend Eva asked.

“All of it,” I said.

“Can you be more specific?” asked her husband.

“*I am being specific!*” I said.

Later the same night I sobbed in Daryl’s arms and tried to put words to why I felt like I was drowning even though on the surface our life was nothing but great. I had no complaints at all, yet I couldn’t breathe, struggled to sleep, and felt panicky nearly every second of every day. It didn’t make sense. So together we began retracing our steps.

Slowly a picture came together. Over the course of our decade-long marriage, we’d gradually but continually stuffed more and more into our lives.

WE WERE TOTALLY  
CONNECTED, CONSTANTLY  
AVAILABLE, AND RAPIDLY  
APPROACHING BURNOUT.

Responsibilities, activities, vocations. Children, classes, cross-country moves. Small groups, Bible studies, mission trips, speaking engagements. In addition to all that, technology that barely existed when we’d first gotten married—Instagram, texting, mobile email—we now used regularly. We were totally connected, constantly available, and rapidly approaching burnout. I felt it most acutely, but Daryl was feeling it, too. His sleep

suffered; his joy diminished. He wore his exhaustion like a pair of smudged glasses—he could still see well enough, but nothing looked as sharp or clear or beautiful as it really was.

Then there was this particular year. We'd moved to southern California where our rent more than doubled for half the square footage of our Midwestern home. We welcomed our second-born, but having babies isn't free. To give Daryl the time he needed to complete his PhD, we relied on a babysitter more frequently. We still had a few student loans. Public transportation was spotty and unreliable, so we had to invest in a second car. We bought a used one (it was older than our marriage and in distinctly worse shape), but the costs still added up.

With all this on our plates, I'd done the logical thing and gotten a second job. We sailed along swimmingly. For a while.

With piles of papers to grade, I spent less time with Daryl and the kids. When he and I were together we were too spent to connect, so we'd numb out to television or fall asleep reading in bed. Our life together was cluttered.

We began allowing the preschooler to watch more and more TV, which made him cranky and irritable, but what could we do? Guilty about working so

much, I'd bring home little toy surprises, which he'd quickly lose interest in after a day or two. His room was an overflowing, trinket-exploding mess, and he began acting out, hungry for more attention and less stuff. His life was cluttered.

Like most millennials, I spent all my waking hours tethered to my smartphone. My work boundaries were nonexistent, and often a last-minute tech check-in before bed would yield a fitful night of sleep after I discovered a conflictual email from a congregant or a late-night request from a student. My life was cluttered.

Often Daryl was only halfway present, glued to *Sports-Center* on a computer perched on a shelf above our crawling baby's reach. Finishing his PhD left him euphoric but limping, too. The road had been a long one. He scrolled through PhD job boards, updating his resume and obsessing over his chances of landing the perfect gig. His life was cluttered.

Even the baby, then only six months old, suffered from the too muchness of it all. I'd nurse him while responding to emails, noticing only occasionally that his little blue eyes were searching in vain to meet mine. His life was cluttered.

We were a hot mess, all of us, with me as the biggest offender of the Too Much Clan, always taking on

more, saying yes, filling up time and space, wasting energy on little projects, teaching my brood to do likewise. Yet we persisted in our cluttered lives, unaware that there could possibly be another way.

*We are sensible, my husband and I told ourselves. We are frugal, thoughtful, wise people, we told ourselves. There's absolutely nothing we could do to make our life simpler!*

This simply wasn't true.

What *was* true was that it was too much. All of it. *Everything*. The schedule, the workload, the possessions, the technology, the wardrobe, the budget, the noise. The constant connectedness through email and social media and texting. The filled-to-the-brim calendar where we shoehorned so many houseguests into our tiny condo that our neighbors asked if we were secretly running a bed and breakfast. (Hey, you move to California from Wisconsin and people want to *visit*.)

It was all too much.

So... we stopped.

Not everything, and not all at once, but much of it. Most of it.

We had hard conversations and spent lots of time on our knees. We fought with God and sometimes

each other, because giving up things is hard. We cancelled media subscriptions and pared down our mail. We subscribed to an honest-to-goodness newspaper, turned off cable, and stopped allowing ourselves to be consumed by the twenty-four-hour news cycle. We cleaned out our garage, our closets, our cabinets, our drawers. We took a *crapload* of stuff to Goodwill.

We said no a lot. No, thank you. No, really. No, not today, not tomorrow, not now, not ever.

We simplified our meals and wardrobes and schedules. We gave ourselves only ten minutes of mindless internet surfing a day, and then five. We deleted apps from our phones. First every social media app, and then almost everything else (more on that later).

Little by little the most amazing thing started to happen. We began to learn what was truly essential and what wasn't, and with each nonessential thing we let go of, our hearts grew calmer, quieter, more open, and more joyful. Our souls grew lighter. Our relationships grew deeper. And each and every time God pried our hands off of the things we clung to, he filled them anew with more of himself. It turns out that holding on to stuff and busyness was not grace but burden.

Slowly, God taught us to pray and read more deeply. To notice our kids: their moods, their needs, their

sweet little faces. To help them slowly detox from a constant stream of activity and motion and technology and “educational television” and the latest Disney fad. We watched their little minds begin to sharpen and focus and rest and rejoice.

We *all* began to sleep better.

We started to see one another anew—the spouse we’d each fallen in love with all those years ago. We watched lines of exhaustion begin to fade, smiles begin to return, steps begin to slow, laughter begin to bubble up more easily and regularly.

The goodness we discovered went far beyond our own household. As we uncluttered, God taught us

WITH EACH NONESSENTIAL  
THING WE LET GO OF, OUR  
HEARTS GREW CALMER,  
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MORE JOYFUL.

to grow more sensitive to our neighbors and our neighborhood, to the church calendar, to what was in season at the grocery store, to the nuances in the weather, and, most importantly, to the beautiful, subtle,

powerful movement of the Holy Spirit in the world and the church, in our minds and in our midst.

The more we gave up, the more we gained.

My panic? It stopped. Our budget? It became a thousand times easier to meet each month. Our trust in God? It grew exponentially. We aren't minimalists, but we have become minimal-ish, not just in our possessions but in our schedules, our home, our spending, and our souls.

Our goal was to find simplicity—not only because of its deep roots in Scripture, but because we wanted to find *ourselves* again. It turns out that God created and formed each of us for lives of generous simplicity; we only need to invite him in to help us make sense of our mess. Over time, the question for us changed from “How can we survive?” to “How can we let God arrange our lives, so we become the kind of people God created us to be?”

The answer became *Uncluttered*.