Newport, Cal – Digital Minimalism

Portfolio Penguin, 2019 [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★

The average US person is checking his smart phone 85 times a day, he's using social media two hours a day and the average teenager is consuming various types of media 9 of the 24 hours. After writing three books on how to succeed as a student Cal Newport had his break through with *So Good They Can't Ignore You,* giving somewhat unusual career advice. This book was soon followed by the even larger best seller *Deep Work* that focused on how to be able to do high quality work in today's hugely distracting work environment and by this keeping yourself relevant in a continually changing employment market. The common theme of all these books has been a rational focus on the really important and by this a disciplined usage of time. Time is a hugely precious asset in our short lives so we should try to treat it as such.

The topic of this book wasn't something Newport had planned. Instead the idea came out of comments from his readers on how they apparently felt an even larger need to fend of distractions outside work than in it. People were telling him stories of exhaustion, of discontent with their life, even feelings of addiction, and linking all this to their use of digital media. At the same time as social media got its mobile break through the psychical illness statistics in the Western world shot through the roof. People interacting with Newport seamed to have lost control of their own lives and their usage of time and with this loss of autonomy also their sense of purpose.

True to his proven formula the author is in this book advising us to focus our usage of digital tools to the few chosen ones that best support what we truly value and then knowingly miss out on everything else. It has to be said that Newport hardly is a tech-misanthrope as he's an associate professor of computer science at

Georgetown. In a way he's joining the long line of Silicon Valley luminaries that will not let their own families use the products their companies produce. The book is split in two parts where the first presents the author's solution to the alarming situation, a "digital decluttering" and the second discusses various tools and methods that will help the reader to use digital media in a productive healthy way.

The digital declutter is a combination of a rather abrupt 30 day digital detox period combined with suggestions for a range of meaningful and creative substituting activities. To me this is perhaps the most important realization in the book; that you have to replace the value in the addictive activities with something else that brings satisfaction - or the chock therapy will fail. After the digital declutter-period is over one is allowed to reintroduce digital tools, starting from a blank slate and only adding the few that truly adds value and at the same time deciding on how to use them. Newport strikes you as a constantly rational and disciplined person that seams to like an optimized life. To his credit the method he proposes and advice he gives is flexible enough to fit more personality types than his own and to take account of the digital tools that a person cannot avoid to use if he wants to earn his living. The author understands the difficulties of what he is suggesting.

To me the first part of *Digital Minimalism* feels like the more important part of the book. The many pieces of advice in the later part are good and in many cases thought provoking but if the chock therapy from the first part works they really shouldn't be needed as I see it.

This is a book and an author that don't beat about the bush. If we want to be in command of our own lives we have to make some efforts to accomplish this. Here is some help.

Mats Larsson, May 5, 2020