Prune

When in Doubt, Prune.

Our lives are improved by subtraction, rather than addition:

Dear friend,

A very simple idea:

To gain more wisdom in life, seek to prune the superfluous.

Prune in photography

For example, to make better pictures-- seek to prune the superfluous distractions from your pictures.

The best pictures follow Einstein's motto:

Make it simple as possible, but not simpler.

This is the tricky thing--

How can you make a photograph simple enough-- but not so simple that it loses significance, emotion, and power?

I think the answer is this:

Figure out the 1 essential thing you're trying to say with the picture, and subtract anything that doesn't add to it.

For example, Richard Avedon did this beautifully in his portraits (In the American West). He wanted to give the viewer 100% focus on his subjects-- and he didn't want the background to distract. Thus, he subtracted the entire background -- making the background just pure white.

The zen of monochrome

I also think this is the genius of black and white photography:

You prune away colors, so you are just left with the geometrical shapes, forms, and gestures in your picture.

Prune Technology

Technology is tricky, because there are obviously some technological tools which help us. I personally love my MacBook Pro laptop, iPad, headphones, and other digital tools which empower me and unleash my creativity.

However this is the problem -- **there is a certain point when having too much technology is a distraction, and kills your focus**.

Thus this is the goal:

Add empowering technology to our lives, but prune away the technology which distracts or stupefies us.

For myself, focus is one of the things I value the most in my life. And this is the secret I discovered for focusing:

Rather than trying to force yourself to "focus"-- better to SUBTRACT or PRUNE/REMOVE what distracts you!

The last 2 years I have been on a brutal path of pruning distractions, which included:

- Pruning email (I went nearly a year without checking or using email)
- Pruning devices (I got rid of my phone)
- Pruning toxic people from my life (dad)
- Pruning distracting social media (I haven't checked any of my social media accounts in about 2 years)
- Pruning the media (I haven't read the news for nearly 3 years-- which has actually made me more optimistic and positive about society and the future)
- Pruning dairy (I'm lactose-intolerant), pruning sugar and simple carbohydrates, pruning alcohol (I don't drink alcohol anymore-- not for any ethical reasons, I just don't feel good when I drink alcohol).
- Pruning superfluous desires: I don't really care so much for stuff or money anymore. This allows me to have more focus to produce, create, and philosophize.
- Pruning my wardrobe: I wear only all black everything; same outfit everyday.

Pruning in wisdom and philosophy

The tricky thing about trying to seek knowledge and wisdom is this:

How to subtract bad/misleading ideas from your mind.

Also,

How to subtract all of this brain-washing that happened to us from when we were kids, when we went to school, university, and from our jobs.

Also,

How to prune away false desires.

A simple filter I've been using is this:

Try to read as little as possible from the last 50-100 years.

For example, the only really good book I've read about the downsides of technology is 'Brave New World' by Aldous Huxley, which was written around the 1920s-30s (almost 90-100 years ago!). None of the modern business books on AI and all this nonsense have been useful.

The other day I finished all 3 books of Dante's "Divine Comedy" (Inferno, Purgatory, Paradiso) -- which was written several hundreds of years ago. It is still phenomenal -- what Dante wrote about in terms of human biases, human weaknesses, etc still hold today. (To read more, search 'Digital Dante' from Columbia University -- I have even been teaching myself a little Italian on the side).

Pruning as a filter

There are trillions of Petra-bytes of data in the world. There is no way in a human lifetime (let's say the maximum is ~120 years) to consume everything.

Thus in our lives, we must filter. We filter away all the crap and noise-- and we only want to allow the valuable signal into our lives.

Which means,

Filter 99.99% of the bullshit in the world, to get .01% of the gold in the world.

Or in other words:

To live a good life means to figure out what NOT to do in life. To prune away superfluous activities which waste our time and lives.

In other words,

Don't do anything which is unmeaningful to you.

Pruning in zen

The notion of pruning is good-- when we think about trees and biological life. Often if we want a tree to grow taller (Bonsai Tree), we prune away branches, twigs, or parts which hold it back. Similarly, we kill parasites (insects which eat your precious plants), in order for our fruit to grow.

To grow big and strong, we must prune. Prune our minds, and prune our social circles (prune toxic folks, and only keep good folks in our inner-circle). We must prune bullshit information and false biased news -- in order for our minds to have enough emptiness to actually form our own opinions, and to use our 'critical thinking' faculties.

Practical pruning ideas:

Things I've done in my life, which have been very useful:

1. Uninstall one app from your phone, laptop, or tablet everyday.
2. Subtract food-items from your diet which cause you irritation, stomach pains, or cause you to deposit excess body adipose tissue (fat) from your system. I have subtracted dairy, gluten, sugar, high fructose corn syrup, rice, pasta, and other simple carbohydrates from my diet with great results (reduced body fat percentage, and greater mental clarity throughout the day).
3. Get rid of clothes from your closet which you haven't worn in a year: Old jackets, shirts, etc. Donate them at the local Goodwill or community center, or just literally throw them away.
4. Prune your social circle: Don't waste your time or resources with people who don't add to your life.
5. Seek to remove or subtract devices or cameras from your life, instead of accumulating more. If you want to upgrade your devices, then simply sell or give away (for free) your older devices to folks who could better use it.
6. Stop reading the news and media-- especially when it runs on advertising. For more 'truthful' news, pay a monthly subscription to know that you're not getting suckered.

7. Stop using "free" social media networks (Facebook-Instagram) -- because they are somehow modifying your behavior in sneaky ways in order to monetize. Better to pay money for social media services.

To sum up:

When in doubt, prune.

ERIC