Smart and Simple Matters 003:

Healing Your Technology Illness with Ethan Waldman

Show Notes at: http://valueofsimple.com/smart-and-simple-matters-podcast-003-with-ethan-waldman

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In this podcast episode you'll learn about:

- What mixing passion, patience, and confidence can do for you
- A *huge* warning sign your email inbox is sick
- How to value your time…and when to respect it enough to allow people to help you
- Success with using the least amount of technology possible
- The first question business owners normally ask Ethan…and why it's the wrong question to ask
- What kind of self-sufficiency is most important for small businesses
- The story behind the quote, "Tiny man in tiny house seeks tiny piece of land"

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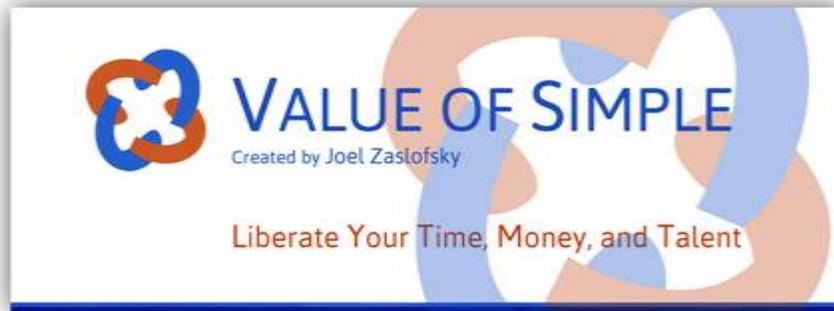
Joel: Hey there and welcome to the **Smart and Simple Matters** show with your host Joel Zaslofsky. He's quirky, he's mildly entertaining, and he has a strange fascination with stories about kids finding money on the ground. This is episode number three.

Welcome to what's going to be a phenomenal episode of the **Smart and Simple Matters** show. I'm pretty stoked to have **Ethan Waldman** on with me today.

The short way to introduce Ethan is as an all-around technology whiz and wise beyond his years when it comes to living a simple life. But, that would be doing him a disservice, so I will tell you a bit more about this classy man.

Ethan lives in Burlington, VT, is a self-described Mac fanatic, plays a number of musical instruments, and does some quality songwriting. Ethan also runs a business at **Cloud-Coach.net** where he shows the world just how much he loves small businesses and owners like me.

He has an email mastery system called **Inbox Zero** and we'll be talking about that and how you could use it to simplify and organize your email.

And if that's not enough, he is also a **WordPress** coach and all-around technology coach.

He's been featured on prominent websites such as **Productive Flourishing, ProBlogger, The Minimalists, Jeff Goins, Write to be Done, Be More with Less…**the hits just go on and on.

So welcome, Ethan. Glad to have you on the show.

Ethan: Thanks. It's great to be here, Joel.

Joel: To make sure everyone knows what kind of awesomeness we're covering today and how it will benefit them, Ethan and I are going to be discussing technology tips, some minimalist wisdom, common sense ways to simplify your work and life, and, if we have time, and I really hope we do, I'll give him an opportunity to talk about the how and why behind the tiny house that he is building.

So, Ethan, let's draw everyone a picture of your story behind becoming a Cloud Coach and being "your guy for that". Can you tell us a bit about how your online entrepreneur journey began? Like what was the catalyst or what were the catalysts?

Ethan: Sure. I would say that in regard to becoming the Cloud Coach, I kind of joke that I've been doing this since I was about eleven or twelve; just nobody was paying me for it until recently. But enough people said, "Man, you could charge people money for that kind of help."

I've heard that enough times that it finally clicked that that's probably what I should be doing and I should build a business around something that I'm really good at.

My story goes that I started helping my aunt with her computer when I was a little kid. I started helping my grandparents with their computer and I just have always had a patient and compassionate way of helping people when they don't understand something. Getting practiced at doing that has led me to where I am now.
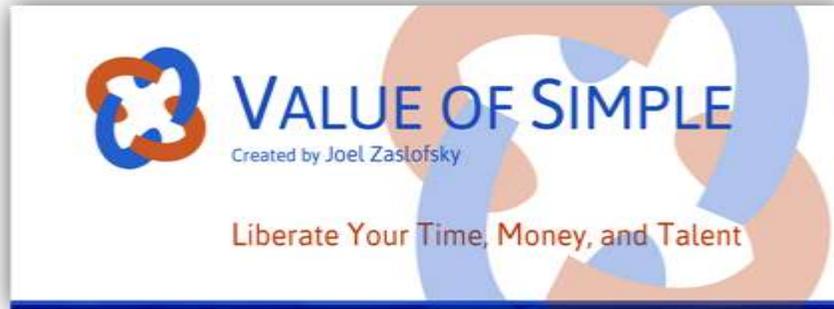
I would say that the catalysts for actually starting Cloud Coach more recently was that I was in technology education but on the corporate side of things – doing technology training for bigger companies.

I just really never felt connected with the people that I was training. I've really always loved small businesses so I didn't feel like I had the impact that I do now when I can work with somebody one-on-one on their business' website or social presence versus teaching the employees of some department of some company how to do one little part of their job.

Joel: Gotcha. When you offer the ability for people to have you be "your guy for that", you before had a very small window in which you could operate. Now that you're doing your own thing and you have the ability to interact with people, I know, because I've seen, you know just an absolute ton about technology. So you are using your passions right now to be people's "guy for that" in a ton of different ways. Can you just give us a rough idea in terms of how many different things that you are someone's guy for?

Ethan: Sure. I do everything from helping people buy, select, set up computers, getting their business online, building people simple websites that they can use, teaching people how to update websites they already have, a lot of teaching people about email marketing and building an email list which is just so important, teaching people how to use the social spaces – **Facebook, Twitter, Yelp**, considering ways of getting their businesses out there, and then also just kind of one-off technical things.

The way that I like to talk about it is nobody is stupid. Everybody has wisdom. Everybody has the ability to figure these things out themselves, but it could be the difference between you spending four hours wrangling with some setting or some set up that could take me twenty minutes of a half hour.

It's really about allowing people to value their time for what they are good at and letting me do the things that I'm great at for them.

Joel: Yeah, I could've used you a couple of times last week. But I know that you're like me in some ways in that you have a very simple bootstrapped business model. And every once in a while you're talking about the value of your time -- how much do you value your time?

Do you ever get the urge to just "go big" and abandon some kind of small, limited, simple, bootstrapped model and get some kind of giant complicated system that might have a learning curve that will benefit you in the long tern? Do you ever have that desire to go big?

Ethan: Right now I'm focused on building the business around my skills and around me which I know isn't necessarily the advice that you would hear from a business professor. But again, doing what I do for Cloud Coach is something that I really enjoy. It's something that I don't mind spending my time on.

Right now this is kind of about filling my calendar with inspiring clients and inspiring projects to work on. I definitely do see opportunities to expand in terms of creating more self-guided training because, that's again, something that I do a lot of. What I mean by that is creating learning materials so that maybe I'm too busy to take on another client for WordPress coaching but I also have a course that you can take that teaches you what we would cover in our sessions.
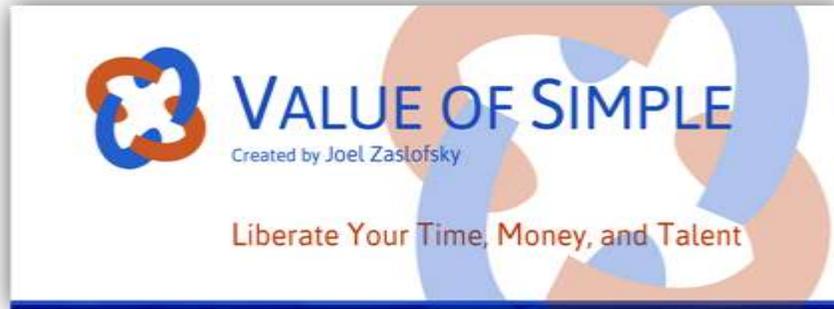
Joel: That's good stuff. So I want to just shift gears ever so briefly and get into more of the core of what we're going to be talking about today. I want to make sure people have the opportunity to hear your thoughts and your tips on a wide range of topics. I'm going to start first with a prominent theme that you've already hit on, which is email.

Everyone who is not living under a rock or is under the age of, say, 80, uses email these days. But at least for me and most of the people I talk to, very few of us would say that we use it well. Actually, I bet more would say that their email controls them instead of them controlling it. Do you have a general philosophy behind the proper and efficient use of email that you can share with us?

Ethan: Sure. I think that it all comes down to a new paradigm and that is that if you treat email using the metaphor of a mailbox the way that you used to use mail like you've got a mailbox, postman comes and delivers your mail, and you've got this physical thing, and then you organize that into files and folders.

If you work in that paradigm for email, you're going to get behind because email doesn't behave that way or it doesn't have to behave that way.

Really, I advocate less obsessive files and folders and organization, and more of relying on search and relying on rules. In Gmail they're called filters, to automate a lot of the organizational things. That way, you don't have to do it as much manual organizing.

Joel: Yeah, that makes sense. So you can give people the diagnosis that their email box is "sick", if you will, and needs to be fixed. I know that oftentimes my email box looks sick and I don't necessarily achieve a "state of inbox zero" as you call it; I'm aspiring to that. How would I know? What are the symptoms though? How would I know that my inbox is sick and I need either a system or somebody to help me with an out of control inbox?

Ethan: Everyone has to be the judge of that for themselves because I know people who swear by leaving every message they've ever received in their inbox and that is what's works for them.

But to me, one tell-tale sign is that if you've got things in your inbox that are no longer action items or relevant things that you actually need to have visible and they're still visible and still lying around because you've either not perfected a system that helps get rid of them or you don't know how to get rid of them in a way that is safe so that you could find them again, that's a good sign. Having things laying around that you no longer need but you still keep, that's a good indication.

I usually try to keep my inbox with things only that I'm using like either things that still need my response or things that I'm referencing, say, I'm writing an article and I got an email from someone with something pertinent to that article that would still be in my inbox. But everything else is out of the inbox.

Joel: Gotcha. So it's not a to-do list. You might have that email sitting in there that you're going to need reference for some article that you need to write but you don't actually need to respond to. It's just something that's prompting that here's something that's interesting or important to me to a later point in life. You'll leave that kind of thing and you won't archive it. You'll obviously label it in a certain way so that you can find it easily.
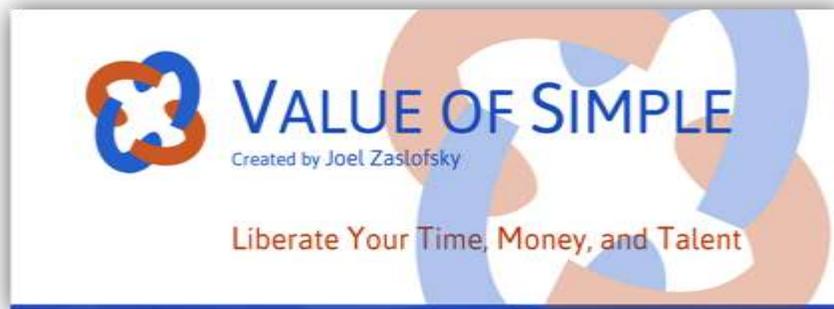
I don't want to spend talking a ton of time talking about email because you have a lot of other great stuff to tell us about today. But I do want to talk a little bit about your **Inbox Zero** program. I haven't used it, yet, although I'm getting a little bit tempted. I have seen some *rave* reviews and testimonials from people who have used it.

I believe you say that you can create your own **"air traffic control"** around your inbox. What is that? How does Inbox Zero help me achieve my own air traffic control system?

Ethan: That's a good question. I think that if you think about the metaphor of what air traffic control is, there is this tower -- there is this brain that's controlling some form of chaos. It's controlling all these things coming in to the airport. The Inbox Zero Training Program, it's kind of two parts. The first half I would say is all focused around cleaning up the mess that you already have, and then the second half is around creating a system that will organize that mess for you in the future.

Basically, I give you, in the course, there's a recipe for these filters that you set up. If you follow the process, it's something that you have to do over and over again. You build up this catalog, almost, of these filters to the point where most of the email that comes into your inbox is kind of already mitigated before you've even dealt with it, like it's already pre-labeled.

All you have to do is look at it. If you need to respond, respond. If you don't, archive it. It's already in the place that it needs to be.

That's where I came up with the air traffic control metaphor because when we go to the airport we don't really interact with the air traffic control. They are just doing it and they are making it safe for us and they are making the airport work.

It's kind of the same thing with the Inbox Zero Training Program. Once you set this all up, it's just there, it just starts working and you don't have to interact with it nearly as much. You put in the time up front and then you've built a system.

Joel: Yeah. I'm not getting stuck on it, but your recipe for labels sounds somewhat 'delicious' in a metaphorical way, I bet that's pretty good. It reminds me a little bit about what you just talked about; something that I think about pretty frequently which is making sure that things don't get worse before you start spending your energy and time on making them better.

I'm a huge advocate on basically stopping the bleeding and classic phrase "when you're in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging." It sounds like you help people stop digging. And then after they've broken themselves out of those bad habits or changed their mindset around what their inbox is or could be, then you build up those skills to give them the going forward to put it on autopilot and to be their own air traffic control. That's good stuff.

Just an FYI to the world, I'm in the development stage of unleashing my first product later this year and because of that, I've been thinking a little bit about my self-worth and how that might increase once I have something amazing to offer the world, but you already have a great product out there. How did your feelings change in terms of the value you are adding to the world when you launched **Inbox Zero**?

Ethan: This is another one of those things where it was something that I was doing before but I never had attached value to it because these are all things that are inside of Gmail. I didn't write any code; I didn't invent a new plugin that does this for you. This is just using what you already have.
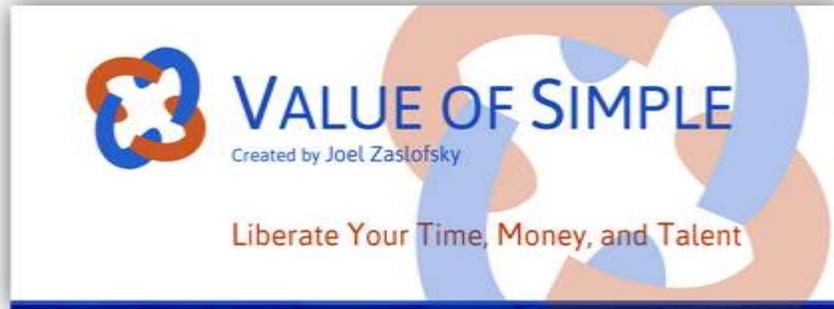
Before I really started doing this training, I assumed that everybody knew this; everybody could figure it out. But as I interact with people through Cloud Coach, it really became clear that was not the case. People really did need help with this.

It just feels great to get good testimonials and see the comments of the people who are having a huge impact for this. If feels great; it really feels great.

At first I was hesitant about charging for it because, again, this isn't something that I've created. But now, just based on the value that people say they're getting from it, I feel a lot better about it.

Joel: Yeah. That's awesome. Using what you already have. I tend to do the same thing with spreadsheets and a lot of other people do it in the same way.

Would it be fair to summarize what you just said as, in general, people have a lot of the tools and resources that they need to achieve whatever it is that they want. Sometimes they just need some awareness? Somebody to give them additional guidance or handholding to say, "Look, you have what you need. Here is a program; here is a paradigm for you. And now, use the tools; don't buy some super fancy plugin or additional service. Use what you already have."

Ethan: Yeah, that's such a great way of saying it. I think that applies not just to email but to just using technology for your business in general is…more technology is not better. In fact, I would say get away with using as little technology as you can because that's less that can fail or break or cause complications. Especially for new business owners, you can get obsessed with all these different tools and services and plugins and things that are available to you.

It's funny; when I talk to new business owners I think the thing that they are usually the most interested in talking about is **SEO** (Search Engine Optimization). It's like, "You don't have any content to optimize. Slow down, that will come in time. But first, there needs to be something there."

It's really about focusing on what you already have in the programs, software, the laptop that you already own, and also about focusing on what you can offer, what value you have to offer to other people. Focus on honing in on that and making that clear before you get interested in doing click tracking or heat maps or all that other crazy stuff that you can do later once you actually have some customers or some traffic.

Joel: Right on. Do what you are good at first whether it involves a pen and paper or whether it involves some fancy website and then build upon that.

That's good and I know one other thing that will be good. One of the main reasons I was excited to have you on the show today is because I wanted to ask you this specific question. Here it comes: Is development or self-sufficiency with technology, and you might have already answered this to a little extent, more important to running a small business than other types of self-sufficiency like, for example, bookkeeping or marketing?

Ethan: I think I have two answers to the question. For somebody with a brick and mortar business, I would probably put it on the same level of importance as the bookkeeping, marketing, and other skills like that. If you have a business that's based solely online, you're going to do yourself a huge favor by becoming self-sufficient with the technology earlier as opposed to later.
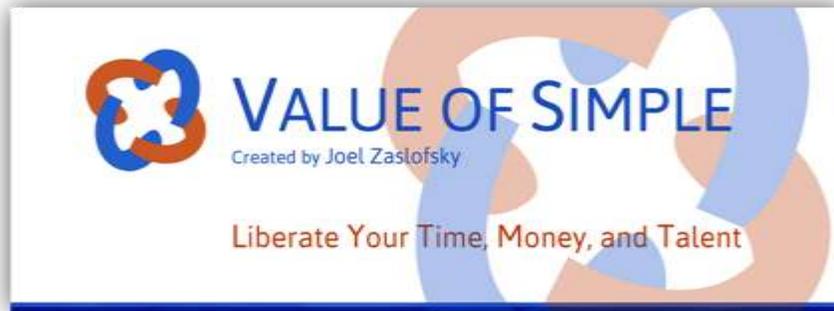
My caveat to my first answer is that so many of these other services are now technology-based that, again, it all comes back to the self-sufficiency. For instance, you can great online bookkeeping software for a couple of bucks a month. But again, if you are not comfortable using it, then you're stuck paying someone to do your bookkeeping.

Learning the technology can often have its own benefits but of course if you know nothing about marketing and you don't get any customers, you won't be able to afford the technology.

It's different for different people but it's up there depending on your business.

Joel: Well, that's great and I'm sure if I were to engage you one-on-one you'd have a lot more to tell me about that. Can you tell me though…I understand that you have a free strategy session that you offer to potential coaching clients.

I know you said when people first engage you they talk a lot about SEO. There's probably some other things that you talk about. What would I get out of a strategy session with you as a potential coaching client?

Ethan: I think it's really about just looking at what the current state of your business is in terms of its relationship with technology and then looking at where are the opportunities – where can we either use technology or maybe get rid of technology to move your business to the next level.

A lot of times, it's part business consulting and part technology because it's like, "Oh, I have no way that I'm capturing the email addresses of my visitors. I'm not building a list." So then we would focus--, we might identify email marketing and finding the right email service for you and signing up for it as our potential goal.

But essentially, we would look at your current state and identify where there are opportunities to use new technology to further the business.

Joel: All right, so we've talked about the tools that you give other people to simplify and organize their lives. What are the primary tools that you use to organize *your* personal life? You don't have to list all of them; maybe just a couple. I'm sure there's a lot.

Ethan: Well, again, this is an area where I'm constantly refining and trying to simplify and use less things. I have the bad habit of, I'm the kind of person who would write down a to-do on that scrap of paper in my pocket and then it will disappear.

I'm a big fan of **Evernote** which is a pretty popular synched notebook kind of thing. I can add things to Evernote from my iPhone or from my desktop computer or from the Web. I like Evernote as kind of my database of information and ideas.

I have used, from time to time, when I really need to create a lot of lists and outlines, I use a free site called **Workflowy**. I'm a big fan of just kind of bulleted lists, outline-based lists. Workflowy is a really minimalist, simple platform for building those kinds of lists.

And that's it. There's so much available like your iPhone has a reminders application, it's got a to-do application, and notes, there are just so many different options but I try to keep it as simple as I can.
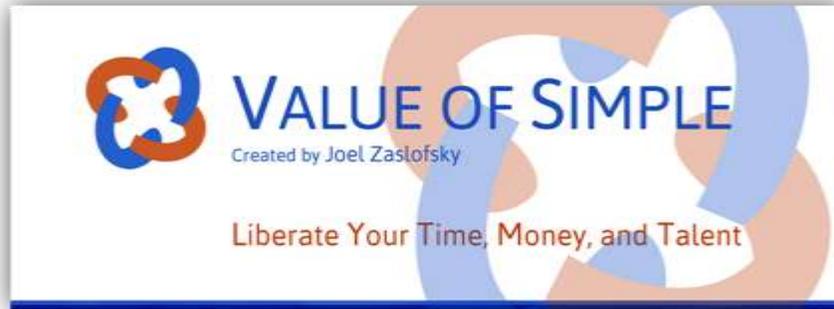
Joel: Yeah. I try to do as well. We're always trying to add complexity to life. Sometimes it's needless and sometimes it's detrimental. That's a mantra that I try to say every time I wake up. Most days I'm successful and other times, not so much.

You and I are both small business owners. But if I'm not a business owner but I'm still interested in becoming self-sufficient with the common types of technology that you are talking about, I might offer up a great free service like **Dropbox** as well to synch a whole bunch of different files amongst various systems. **Google Drive** and **Microsoft Skydrive**, they all fulfill the same role but that's great for free storage and synching all of your online files to various devices. What other resources, if I want to be self-sufficient and I'm not a business owner, would you recommend?

Ethan: I think self-sufficiency can go beyond that. There are things that I write about, just common sense things like backup. A lot of times, people who are not as focused on technology haven't really secured a way of backing up their laptop and their files. That's something that I can help somebody set up.

I get a lot of questions and I've helped people out with calendars and email synching with their smartphones. That's another area where whether you are a business owner or not, you can really improve your life if you know how to use your smartphone in a good way. Just the amount of time that it can save you and helping keeping you organized, helping people get their email on their smartphone, their calendars synched up, things like that.

And then of course back to the **Inbox Zero** stuff because I've definitely worked with people who don't have business but still have nightmare inboxes that need help just as much as the business owner.

Joel: Yeah. I'll send my family members to you. I can think of a couple offhand that could definitely use your services. I've seen it and, oh my goodness, the terror of just peering into their world and what it looks like from an organization perspective.

Well, we are going to have a little bit of time; I'm going to give you a moment to talk about your tiny house in just a second. I just want to ask you one more thing real quick. If you had a very short list, either of a website or a book, that's really shaped how you think about your minimalist needs when it comes to life and when it comes to technology, do you have something that was a game changer for you – a website or a book that you want to make other people aware of?

Ethan: I would say, and this is funny to say this, the book **Clutter Busting** by **Brooks Palmer** is something that I read about a year ago and kind of helped shape my desire to get rid of a lot of things. I've also adopted a lot of that thinking with what I do with Cloud Coach in terms of using less technology and removing clutter from your computer just like you can remove clutter from your physical surroundings in your life.

Another person who I've found inspiring is **Tammy Stroebel** of **Rowdy Kittens**. She was actually where I first saw tiny houses on wheels. That was a big game changer for me because it's actually now something that I'm doing.

I would say that a website that was influential for me, **Illuminated Mind**, now called **Paid to Exist**, **Jonathan Mead's** website, that was where I really was inspired to explore what work I could do that wouldn't feel like work – what work was I passionate about enough and good at enough that I could offer to other people and provide value and also be doing something that was fulfilling to me so that hard work doesn't feel like work as much if you really love it.
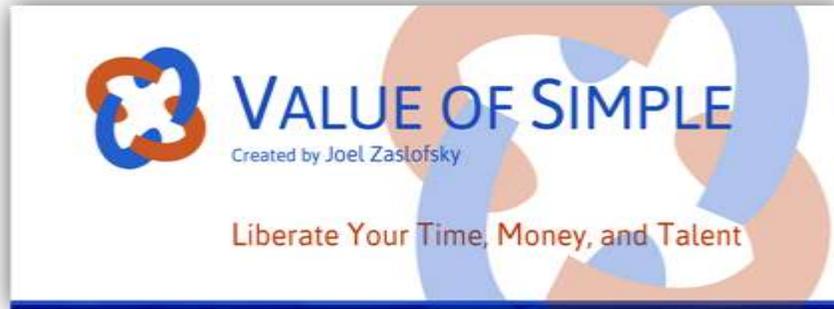
Joel: Yeah. I've also been to **Jonathan Mead's** site. I've been following along for about two and a half years now and I know he just switched to **Paid to Exist**. He's awesome at helping people find their passion.

Another guy in a similar vein who is one of my champions of what life could or should look like is a guy named **Scott Dinsmore**. He writes for **Live Your Legend**. He fills not the same role, but a similar role that I know Jonathan at **Paid to Exist** fills for other people.

Did I catch you chuckling when you were talking about the book Clutter Busting? Is it because that I've recently gone away from using the word clutter and replaced it with chaos? It's okay. Don't worry. People can still use the word clutter without having to cringe or worry, "Boy, what's Joel going to say? He really wants me to be talking about the word 'chaos' instead.

Ethan: You should come up with a new phrase, a new catchphrase because 'clutter busting' has really good ring to it. You need like 'chaos-something'.

Joel: It does. I will immediately get to working on that as soon as we're done talking here today. All right, I promised I'm going to deliver on it. You've talked about **Tammy Stroebel** and her inspiration for putting a tiny house on wheels -- I think it's 150 square feet or less.

You've told us why you're inspired by her story, her pictures and the simplicity and going down to the bare minimum. You're not depriving yourself of anything by moving into a tiny house. You are just building something that is more representative of how you want to interact with the world and the values that you have. Can you tell us maybe a little bit more about the why behind it and almost as importantly, how you're doing this?

I understand you're currently building one yourself and it may be done sometime soon, right?

Ethan: Soon is the operative word. No, I'm just kidding. I'm building it myself and I don't have a lot of carpentry experience so it's a huge learning experience for me. But the why behind the project really just falls in line with my technology philosophy of using less. I like that you qualified your statement about that it's not depriving myself. I'm not trying to go live as a monk in the woods and drinking water and air for dinner.

It's really just about minimizing the parts of my life and the things that I own; just minimizing them so that the only things that I have are the things that I really like having or I really need to have so that I can focus my time elsewhere.

I would say that at first, the tiny house was an integral part of starting my own business. Before I made the leap from a full-time job, I was obviously like anybody who had really worried about whether I would be able to make any money. And so, the idea if the tiny house really appealed to me from that perspective because here was something that I could build for about twenty grand and own it outright and then maybe pay someone a little bit of rent to part it on their property but other people have figured out other ways of bartering.

My cloud coaching services are highly sought after. I barter for all kinds of things so it's like I could totally see bartering with someone to let me be on their land in exchange for a couple hours of Cloud Coach work for them.
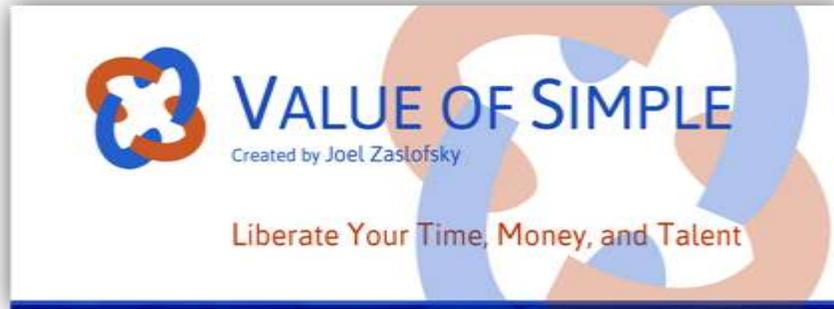
Before I made the leap, it was like, "I need to do this so that I have a secure place to live regardless of how much I'm making." Obviously now that I made the leap and kind of proven that I can support myself, it's still important to me from the perspective of simple living, the minimalism, those philosophical kinds of things; less about putting shelter over my head like the dire need to have shelter because obviously I'm not in the tiny house right now. I'm in a condo.

Joel: I would love to see the Craigslist ad that you put out there – *"Man with Tiny House Seeks Land Owner; Will Exchange Technology Services for Use of Land to Put Tiny House on"*

Ethan: Exactly. It will be interesting.

Joel: Make sure you send that to me when you put it out there, OK?

Ethan: I will. *"Tiny Man in Tiny House Seeks Tiny Piece of Land"*.

Joel: Well, we're going to have to save our mutual love of hot yoga and voice-overs for another day. This has been thoroughly enjoyable and I hope extremely valuable for the folks that are listening. I know that I've learned a ton just from talking to you today.

Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you'd like people to know?

Ethan: You should probably tell them how they can find my stuff.

Joel: Oh, you know I probably should. How about I do that. Now, I want you to go to Ethan's website, cloud-coach.net, and check out his expertly crafted articles about technology that are relevant to everyone.

You've heard us talk; Ethan covers just about everything. You'd think with all the value he cranks out in his email mailing list that you'd have to pay for it. But that's all free and I know, I'm a member of his email community, and would definitely recommend you do the same.

An awesome starting point is his free **four module course** on how to build a profitable and responsive email list and his wonderful **Email Ninja Kit**.

After you're done with **Cloud Coach**, which you should spend some time on, pop on over to **Value of Simple**, and if you haven't picked up your free blueprint to celebrate and share what makes you tick, go to valueofsimple.com/newsletter and sign up to get instant access to the Personal User Guide.

You'll also see seven other smart reasons why subscribing to the free newsletter and joining that growing community could be a great move for you.

So, Ethan, thanks for coming on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Ethan: You're very welcome. It was a very enjoyable half hour.

Joel: All right. It's time for your partner in simplifying to sign off again. You've just listened to the **Smart and Simple Matters** podcast with Joel Zaslofsky – creator of all things Value of Simple.

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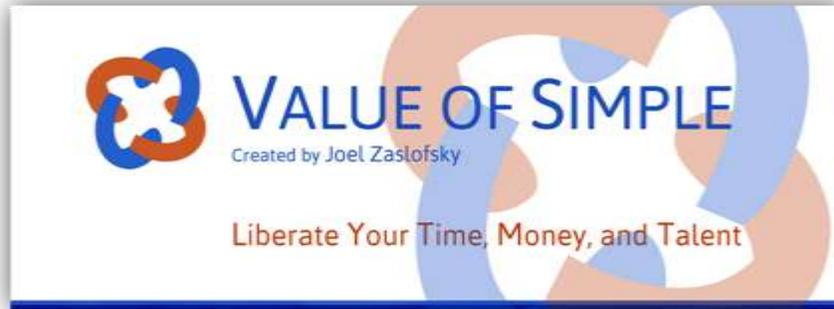
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