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Contact: Dennis Welch

Cave Henricks Communications

512. 506.9725 or [Dennis@CaveHenricks.com](mailto:Dennis@CaveHenricks.com)

## **Can We Achieve Balance in Our Busy Lives?**

# **Say Yes to NO:**

## **Using the Power of NO to Create the Best in Life, Work, and Love**

**By Greg Cootsona**

*If you feel overwhelmed and overcommitted, **Say Yes to NO** will help you shake up your priorities on the job and at home. Greg Cootsona shows how finding the proper balance of work and rest—‘the rhythm of NO’—can lead to a more relaxed and rewarding life. In our busy, busy world, everyone needs to read this book.”*

**-Ken Blanchard, coauthor of *The One Minute Manager*® and *Leading at a Higher Level***

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In an era when communication is wireless, paperless, and moving at a constant clip around the globe, it is increasingly clear that one of the most critical issues today is how we spend our precious time. Not only do we work more than the generation before us, technology has now tied us to our phones and email around the clock.

A new book by Pastor Greg Cootsona offers us all a permission slip to say NO—to create the space and time for the things and the people that really matter to us. His prescriptive advice is a pathway to creating a life with real purpose.

**SAY YES TO NO** (Doubleday Religion, Trade Paperback, March 2009) is a pushback against the pressures of today's world—a world that puts us constantly on call. Cootsona was a pastor at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, living a non-stop, round the clock life caring for his congregation, raising two daughters, and nurturing his marriage when life issued a wake up call. The illusion of being able to juggle it all was shattered for Cootsona at a cardiac clinic in Manhattan where the then 38 year old was told to slow down—or else.

Cootsona's close brush with serious health issues forced him to carefully consider how to balance his life goals, his growing family obligations, and his most important relationships. Struggling to make it all work, Cootsona's discoveries may be the most important life strategy that a busy executive or leader will ever find. He learned that by making choices and saying no to some things, allowed him to live a life that was full of meaning, but not scheduled every second. Armed with this new insight, Cootsona felt compelled to share his discovery in **SAY YES TO NO**, so that others might find their lives more manageable, no matter their profession or station in life. “This book describes the lessons I’ve learned,” says Cootsona. “I’ve consulted scores of people about the principles in this book: dot com CEOs, investment bankers, business consultants, stay-at-home parents, artists and students. All, at one time or another wrestle with the issues the book addresses.”

Cootsona deftly uses the analogy of Michelangelo's sculpting for how we should pursue a well-lived life. He suggests we chip away all the peripheral noise, intrusions, unnecessary distractions and yes—even limiting technology's hold on us—to find balance in every aspect of our lives including friendships, families, work, and our

communities. He specifically offers insight on how using the word “no” can craft better friendships, personal relationships, and connections with family.

In **SAY YES TO NO** Cootsona addresses:

- **The difficulty of saying yes to NO in a world that we’re always tethered to**
- **What we miss by not saying yes to NO**
- **The folly of saying yes to pursuing wealth as an end in itself**
- **Creeping technology intrusions**
- **The need for rest**

This book will force everyone racing through life to consider not only the cost of their pace, but also what it would take to create time for the things that will give their lives true purpose. Publisher’s Weekly says “...the author’s personal experience, unique presentation and eagerness serve to animate tried and true ideas.”

**SAY YES TO NO** will be a helpful guide for anyone trying to navigate the modern world and still have time for the things that matter most.

**Cootsona** currently lives in Chico, California and is the Associate Pastor of Adult Discipleship and College Ministries at Bidwell Presbyterian Church. He is married to Laura, and they have two daughters, Melanie and Elizabeth.

**SAY YES TO NO**  
**Author: Greg Cootsona**  
**Doubleday Religion**  
**Publication Date: March 3, 2009**  
**Trade Paperback, \$12.95**  
**ISBN: 978-0-385-52573-2**

## An Interview with Greg

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***Q: In your book, you talk of the “power of NO.” What is the power of NO?***

A: The power of NO is this: When we state strategic NOs, we create space for our yes’s in personal life, relationships, and work. When we say the right NOs, our yes’s can take hold and flourish. A key, almost extreme example, is marriage: when we say yes to our spouse, we are forced to “forsake all else” (as the old vows used to say)—that is, we clearly say NO to the possibility of marrying any one else. Only when we take that commitment seriously, can marriage truly flourish.

***Q: What personal experiences have contributed to your belief in the power of NO?***

A: While living in Manhattan, serving as pastor, and raising two young daughters, God caught my attention. I had said yes to too many good things. My heart was demonstrating signs of stress, and my doctor began to express concerns. So, at age 38, I found myself taking a stress test to determine whether the pains in my chest were actually something more serious. Thankfully, my heart was fine; it was just some mild high blood pressure going haywire. Nonetheless, I realized that my health was getting worse due to the pressures of my personal goals, my family’s needs, and my ministry obligations. I couldn’t just take on a better attitude or try to work on my schedule—I had to say NO. At that point, my wife Laura and I reaffirmed a key commitment to the practice of Sabbath, which, for us, means taking an entire day off from the pressures of work and life’s obligations.

***Q: How might the power of NO benefit a person's personal life? Work life?***

A: I took a running start with this in my previous answer. In personal life and work, the easiest place to see the power of NO at work is in taking a Sabbath. (In fact, the chapter on Sabbath really formed the starting point for this book.) In Sabbath, we find strength from God through refueling, and we become better in our work as a result. Who would run a car continually and never go to the gas station? So too, God actually sets in the Ten Commandments the directive to take a day off. How much better does it get than that?

***Q: How might the power of NO impact a person's friendships? Relationships with family?***

A: Two key areas in which the power of NO benefits relationships with friends and family are *intentionality and boundaries*. (There are many others.) When we say NO to pursuing every relationship, we learn to intentionally focus on a few key friends that God has given us in order to invest more deeply. Naturally, we do this through prayer and with care. For those in church ministry, this is critical for building the leaders that God has given us. Secondly—and to switch context—parents need to set *boundaries*—and I suppose youth workers need to as well. IN that way, we help our children and our youth to grow by demonstrating constraints. It's by offering channels and direction that a river flows.

***Q: You link the power of NO with the freedom of forgiveness. Why?***

A: Forgiveness essentially takes away the present power of a past wrong. When we forgive, we say NO to continually bringing a past hurt or wrong into the present. We take away its power. Now I'm not minimizing that when someone hurts us it is evil. God sees that. But God forgives us. (God, of course, also sees when we hurt others.) We did not choose to be wronged, but we can choose whether we will let it continue to take away our joy. I've even heard this kind of statement from those who experienced extreme violence, like parents of a murdered son or daughter, which blows me away and challenges me to the core. Grudges and complaints are probably closer to most of us. It's tempting to nurse them and to become defined by how we've been wronged. But it steals God's joy in us. It enslaves us. There can ultimately be NO freedom in the present unless we say NO to holding grudges and pain from the past.

***Q: Why can NO never be the last word?***

A: This is critical. ‘NO’ can never be the last word, because God’s Word to us is Jesus Christ in whom “every one of god’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (2 Corinthians 1:20). The other side of this is that in faith we say yes to God’s yes in Jesus Christ. And that yes begins to define our NOs. But there has to be life beyond our NOs. NOs only provide space and boundaries for yes’s to flourish. In the book, I use the image of Michelangelo chiseling the amazing statue of David from a raw block of marble. Sculpture is the art of saying NO, of chipping away what isn’t needed in order to create something beautiful that’s inside. Michelangelo stated that he merely “chipped away all that wasn’t David.” And so, we chip away with our NOs by the grace of God and create a life of beauty, peace, purpose, and meaning. One last thing: we only say NO in the context of our yes to God and to how God has created us.

***Q: Practically speaking, how can someone learn to say yes to NO?***

A: Without trying to be flip, by practicing NO. (“Just say NO,” as it were.) More substantially, saying NO is hard—we don’t want to cut off all the alluring possibilities that dance around us daily and we don’t want to become negative people. So we need conviction and humanity. We need to say NO with conviction (that is, to know why we say it) and humanity (we realize it may disappoint others, but it’s for a more important yes). We must always go back to *why* we are saying NO, and that gives it meaning and prevents us from simply becoming “Dr. NO.” Finally, for those in church ministry, practice NO by taking a day off. God actually commands us to trust him for a day. We can’t tell our people—whether youth or congregations generally—to find joy and peace in the Lord while we run around like scared rabbits. The demands will never be done, and God calls us to refresh and renew at least once a week.

**From: Youth Worker Magazine, January 2009**

## About Greg

Greg Cootsona has always been intrigued by the rhythms of life. From his earliest days growing up in Menlo Park, California, to his sojourn as a pastor in New York City, he has always striven to better understand how life is to be lived and how we can be at our best for the work we are called to do and for those we love.

In his youth, Greg loved the rhythm of tennis and was one of the top players in his state. His family was very supportive and would even take days off from their jobs to get him to and from important tournaments. “My mother was my first PR agent,” he says. “She was always happy to talk about me to others.” But by the time he was twelve, he had lost interest in tennis, feeling the work involved wasn’t worth the outcome.

Then, Greg began to play drums and discovered the joy of music. Throughout his teen years he played in one of the best-known high school jazz and big band outfits in the country and even played the main stage at Montreux, all before turning eighteen. He had always liked school, but he really fell in love with learning in his junior and senior years, before entering UC Berkeley and finding that “there was this terrific interplay of ideas, and I wasn’t really sure what MY IDEA was. I was really interested in the big questions that had confounded humanity down through the years—Philosophy, Sociology, Literature, etc. So I chose Literature.”

But somewhere in his quest to answer the big questions, he was blinded by a light so profound and so bright that it could Not be ignored, and that experience changed his life forever. He was exposed to Christianity in a way that he had never before experienced and, as he had done with tennis and music, he did his due diligence. He began to investigate as fully as he knew how this life that so many intellectuals down through the ages had chosen. “I started reading ‘Mere Christianity’ by C.S. Lewis, and it really got under my skin,” he admits. “What drew me was the person of Christ, but I also found it to be the most compelling lifestyle. It brought coherence and meaning to my life in a way that nothing else did.”

After receiving his doctorate in 1994, Greg took a full time position at the prestigious Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. It was there that the rhythms of life became a bit too intense, and a brush with heart trouble and high blood pressure led him to examine his (and as it turns out, *our*) priorities. The result of that examination is his new book, *Say Yes To NO*, due out on Random House in March '09.

His mission is really a simple one and he pursues that mission with great vigor and joy whether he is teaching a class, playing the drums, or writing a book: “to enjoy the love of God and to glorify Him with the use of my time, my creative passion and gifts for the good of those around me, and ultimately for the good of all humankind.”

Greg currently lives in Chico, California and is the Associate Pastor of Adult Discipleship and College Ministries at Bidwell Presbyterian Church. He is married to Laura, and they have two daughters Melanie and Elizabeth.

## Greg Talks About:

**The difficulty of saying yes to NO:** Michelangelo created beautiful forms through what he removed. His was the Art of Negation. He created through the Power of NO. I find that I am often careless and haphazard at chipping away at the excess and the formless in my life. I don't tap away in order to craft what's essential and crucial in myself. Instead, I add. And, unlike marble, humans have the choice to attaché more and more blocks of unformed matter on our lives. So the chiseled form becomes amorphous again. Or, with all good intention we become bored and abandon our project when just the hint of the beauty is peering out of the rock. Or, we never get started. We stare at the raw, unformed marble and freeze before the tasks that stare back at us.

**What happens when we miss by Not saying yes to NO:** Then, if not through our actions or inaction, the culture adds strata of extra stone. How? We live surrounded by a culture of almost countless possibilities. So paralyzed by choice, we can't decide what to cut out. To commit—to chip away—means to say NO to the overwhelming majority of these alluring possibilities. The options mock the hint of limits, and setting boundaries becomes a mere suggestion. Consequently, many of us stay unformed. We never find a life of beauty, excellence, or success.

**The folly of saying yes to pursuing wealth as an end in itself:** What I really want is freedom, and I think wealth will bring that. In the end, however, money often just brings more money managers, more insurance, and more Visa card offers in the mail. We have a society built on the notion that success depends directly on your “net worth.” That phrase alone should give us pause—that we are worth what we possess. But all too often our culture views wealth as a scorecard. But who sets the scoring? Are investment bankers really worth more than teachers? Professional athletes more than social workers? For one thing, working hard and engaging your best talents don't guarantee material reward. Even complete geniuses don't often make much. Back to Michelangelo for a moment, who grumbled about the times in which he lived: “Having seen, as I said, that the times are contrary to my art, I do not know if I have any hope of future salary.” Instead, our net worth is what is left—the true form—after all has fallen away, chipped away by direction and discipline.

**Creeping technology intrusions:** I find myself in a thicket of technological devices multiplying around me, entertaining me, connecting me. And I wonder: What cricket sounds have I missed when I take a walk with an iPod strapped to me? Has my ability to see a crow or an owl become diminished by the hours I stare into a computer screen? Underneath the electric lamps, have I lost my view of the stars?

**The need for rest:** Human beings throughout time share a common need for rest and renewal. There is a longing in our very selves—our bodies and our souls—for tranquility. We are created for rest, and depending on our resources and depth of insight, we'll do all kinds of things to achieve it.

**What saying yes to NO can mean:** We say yes far too much, cram our days with junk food tasks, abandoning along the way values and commitments that really matter.

Through saying yes to NO I've discovered the secrets of a successful life, not lived under the unrelenting pressure, but with the rhythms of health and wholeness. I want you to experience these discoveries. Because saying NO isn't about sloth and negativity. It's about establishing boundaries that guard important values.