



Episode 61: Look Back - How Reflection Can Help You Make Better Decisions

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 61.

Before we jump into today's episode, I want to say thank you for celebrating my big announcement in last week's episode about the next right thing book. It was so fun to finally announce that we have a book coming in April and to see so many of you pre-order it already.

Quick recap, as you may already know, the book is called *The Next Right Thing: A Simple, Soulful Practice for Making Life Decisions*. My hope is that it will be a lovely extension of the podcast as you navigate the decisions in your life, big or small. I also love the idea of having something you can hold in your hands and give to all your non-podcast listening friends and family members. I know there are probably a lot of them.

As much as I love this medium of podcasting, it can often feel somewhat disembodied. And so the idea of having a book that you can hold and pass around and read and underline and come back to, well as a writer, there is nothing more fun. Now maybe you can relate to this, whenever I announce something I've been working on or something I've made, it's of course, always a gift to be able to share that but it's also nerve-wracking in a way. Two phrases that always haunt anyone who makes things: They might not like it and this might not work.

But as I keep practicing what I preach here and simply do the next right thing in love, I've found those fears fade into the background yes they might not like it and yes it might not work. But what if they do? And what if it does?

So far so good. And that is because of you, your support, kindness, words of encouragement and your preorders have encouraged me more than you can possibly know. I cannot even tell you.

So, thank you, thank you, for your support and showing up for the next right thing.

Now about today's episode, if you've been around here for any length of time, you know the high value I place on reflecting on my life. There are natural times throughout the year that many of us do this birthdays and anniversaries for example and of course that week between Christmas and the new year. What I've discovered, though, it's for me vital for me to reflect on purpose more often than once or twice a year. Not for sentimentality or reminiscing although that can totally be fun for me but more importantly, for the sake of moving forward.

If you want to know why it's important to reflect on your life before January, listen in.

I believe in order to move toward those things we most want for our lives, it's vital to first look back.

Now if you're thinking, Emily enough. I have a decision to make! I want some guidance with THAT, please!

Then, I hope you'll hear me say this: one easy way to make more informed decisions in your life is to reflect on past decisions you've already made. Our choices define our lives, not just the ones we're carrying right now about our future, but also the ones we've already made in our past.

Wouldn't we do well to bring them to mind and see what they have to teach us?

When I go through life without reflection for too long, I feel like I'm only half-human I forget who I am, what I most long for and where I'm headed. I basically walk around with a list of to-dos scribbled on the back of a crumpled receipt in the bottom of my purse and a low-grade panic in the pit of my soul.

Have you been there?

The practice of looking back and paying attention serves as an anchor for the soul in a fast-moving world.

Instead of waiting for the world to stop so we can catch up, we slow ourselves, we look around, and name what we see.

In her book, *Earth Crammed with Heaven*, Elizabeth Dreyer says,

“...our intentionality is a key ingredient determining whether we notice God everywhere or only in church or only in suffering or nowhere. It all depends on how we choose to fashion our world.”

When I’m paying attention to the public road I’m walking and my private world within, I tend to be more patient, more kind, more willing to give myself and others grace. I am able to notice what God is up to within me and around me.

Reflection reminds me I’m a human, not a robot. I have the capacity to not only make choices but to learn from choices I’ve made.

In this short episode, I’ll share my own simple rhythm of reflection in hopes that it could inspire you to come up with your own way. This is what works for me so of course you can take what you like and leave the rest behind. I’ll share it in 3 parts:

First, I’ll share when I like to practice reflection.

Next, what I pay attention to in reflection.

And finally, how I practically do it.

So, here we go.

First, for the when. Now I admit, I am a person who is naturally bent towards reflecting, it is something I enjoy, it is something I don’t have to think a lot about in order to do. However, this episode is really me sharing my journey of uncovering some actual practical ways that I discovered that reflecting helps me the most. That is when I do it in somewhat of a systemized way.

There are two main times that I reflect.

The first is daily. I use a little book called One Line A Day. I think I got my copy from Target, actually. You can get them anywhere. They have been around for years and years. My great-grandmother Goldie kept one of these books and dad mentioned the other day how he saw an entry in hers saying something like, went to the new Bing Crosby movie today. It's so simple.

There's this daily way that you can practice paying attention and reflection. So, I do a daily reflection like that where I look at the day and make a note of something important or noteworthy that happened in our family.

On a larger scale, when do I reflect? I do this on purpose, quarterly more specifically, seasonally. So, if you look at the calendar in three month sections now smart way to do that would be start in January, January, February March but I actually prefer lumping them into seasons instead.

So, because I live in North Carolina in the North Hemisphere in the United States of America, I go by how the seasons tend to go in my hometown. So we are nearing the end of fall season. So for me, December 1 sort of begins winter, even though technically by the calendar it doesn't. So, this period of reflecting will be September, October, November that is Fall. Now, Southern Hemisphere that is your spring.

So, next year when I look back it will be the end of February, and I will look back on the previous three months my winter, December, January, February. And so on throughout the whole year.

That's how I do it. That's when I do it. I practice on a broad scale 4 times a year at the end of each season.

So that's when.

Next, what do I pay attention to or what exactly do I reflect on?

It's easy to become overwhelmed with this practice, especially if you aren't used to it. Though three months is a specific period time, that's still a lot of time there, ninety days, to look back on. What you need when you do this practice is a lens. And the lens I use is to pay attention to what I learned. You can do this any way you want, but for me it helps to look at my life the last ninety days through that lens of learning. I've found that when I pay attention to what I've learned and I intentionally

record them and reflect on them, that's when real change begins to happen in my life and that's when my decisions are best informed for the future.

Here's a question for you to get started: Have you learned something about yourself, about God, about people, about your work, or even about your daily rhythm and systems that could help bring more joy, patience, or ease into your daily life? And a filter for that is to just pay attention to that in the last ninety days. It could be something so simple.

For example, last summer in the midst of taking my grad classes, writing a book that you now know about, prepping to co-lead a trip to London, and the normal family life things with the kids being home for summer and everything, I realized I missed reading fiction but I had zero capacity for it, no space, no time. But what I discovered helped was to make a to-read list of fiction books that I want to refer to once my busy season had passed.

It was a small little thing, but so life giving for me to realize that. So, I paid attention to that and made a note and now I have this running list of fiction books I want to read when this busy season passes.

Another practical thing, super small was upon reflection, I realized I really like black and white mugs more than any other mugs. It sounds silly, but remembering that and writing it down made every mug buying and/or keeping decision super easy for me for the rest of my life. I was able to purge my house of all the coffee mugs I don't use thereby creating less clutter in my cabinets and more joy in my morning cup.

More important than coffee mugs or even a fiction reading list, in the last 90 days, have you learned something about a family member you didn't know before that could help you relate with them better now?

Just a few years ago after 16 or 17 years of marriage, I learned that breakfast dates with John work better than night dates. This was revolutionary - I came upon it by accident when we just happen to go to breakfast one day and he was super chatty. What is happening?! It's because he's a morning person and that's when he has the most energy. Of course, morning dates will invite more conversation and more relation between the two of us.

Now, imagine if I wasn't in the practice of having a reflective posture. I might have noticed that, might have even enjoyed our time. But it would probably have ended there. I may not have realized the connection.

That means as we look at our calendar for the next 90 days, maybe I'll want to plan another morning breakfast date with John.

We've talked about timing, I tend to reflect quarterly. We've talked about the lens paying attention to what you've learned in that quarter. Finally, the how, this is where we get practical in both prayer and practice.

First the practice, then the prayer.

In practice, I have to keep a list. Not one in my head, one on some actual kind of paper or screen. It could be a journal, a document on your computer, in the notes app of your phone. This is not for the sake of anyone but you or me in my case.

Because the problem isn't that we aren't learning or that we have nothing to reflect on. The problem is we don't keep track and we forget.

So, I'm going share a quick list, what I call in my head *mining my life* or perhaps a more eloquent way to look at it is as Parker Palmer says to *let your life speak*.

Where does your life speak these days? Really and truly? Where? Here are 5 actual places I look for clues:

Number one, my daily notebook. I carry this around everywhere I go.

In it, I record daily tasks, books I want to read, and other kinds of to-do list, always with an antennae up for a new thought, or a different perspective, or a fun new fact I didn't know. When something comes, I jot it down and I use WWL (What We Learned) as a signifier. At the end of the quarter, I look for that signifier and then I have my list of what I learned.

The second place I look is social media. This might sound weird but hang with me. At the end of each quarter, I always browse through my Twitter, Instagram and Facebook updates. Not for what other people have said and posted but for what I have said and posted. This always helps to trigger moments or thoughts I had throughout the month that might be worth remembering. Think about how often you have shared a quote that meant something to you on Instagram, or you've asked a question on Facebook where you wanted to get feedback on something that is happening in your life. We can use our social feeds to help us remember our own lives. In fact, I think that is a really great use for Social Media.

The third place I look is the books I'm reading.

I'll thumb back through the books I'm reading and take note of what I underlined. Sorry, y'all, I write in books. Usually, I read with a pen or pencil close by and have no problem with that. But if the book isn't mine or is from the library, I use that daily Journal that I keep with me all of the time to capture quotes. Pro Tip: always include who said it, what book you found it in, and the page number. Trust me when I say there will come a day when you need to know who said the thing and where you found it.

Another place that I look is the photos that I have taken over the last three months.

Browsing through the photos on my phone almost always reminds me of at least one thing I'm learning. Think about it, if something is lovely, fun, thoughtful, or significant in some way in my life, I generally going to snap a photo of it or some aspect of it. So my phone photo album is a good trigger to help me remember. It helps bring to mind not only what I've done, but why I would snap a photo of it in the first place.

It's often not the photo itself that brings the answers, but the why behind it that will allow for the most meaningful reflection.

Finally, I look at my calendar.

I always browse through the last 3 months on my calendar what did I plan that I was glad to attend? Where was my schedule too full? Why was it too full? The calendar alone can provide a wealth of information for me as I attempt to do my next right thing today.

So those are practically five places that I look, my daily notebook, my own social media posts, books I'm reading, photos I've taken, and my own calendar.

I've said a lot of words and we've moved through it fast. That, in somewhat of a nutshell, is my practice of reflection.

But I promised you a prayer so let's do that now.

Because the thing is, none of this reflection will amount to much by way of helping shape your decisions if it isn't informed by the Spirit of God how God might be shaping you, speaking to you, nudging and inviting you.

As you think back on these last few months, is there a word or phrase that comes to mind that could describe them?

When you look ahead into the last few weeks of this year, what is one word you *hope* will describe this time?

As you begin or continue a regular practice of listening to your life, what is your life asking for most?

Is it Love?

Do you want Belonging?

Are you hoping for Joy?

Might you just want Peace?

Could it be Connection?

Is it freedom you seek?

Whatever it is you're looking for most, you have a God who knows what you need. He has not forgotten you.

And so now we pray that we may be people who know, not only who we are but *where* we are in relation to our past, our present and our future.

God, you light up our way in the darkness.
You bring comfort in the midst of our biggest questions.

As we let our lives speak in your presence, as we mine our lives for clues of where you might be working remind us again how you are the way, the truth, and the life.

Remind us, no matter what, you aren't in the business of making all new things, but instead in love and great compassion, you make all things new.

Thanks for listening to episode 61 of The Next Right Thing.

Here I've shared when I practice reflection, what I reflect on and how I actually do it by keeping a list of what I've learned. At the end of every season, I share part of my own list on my website. I've been doing this for years now on the last weekday of November for fall, the last weekday of February for winter, May for the Spring, and August is when I share my summer list.

Each quarter I have readers join me by linking to their own lists as well and it's a really fun way to motivate yourself to keep a list of what you're learning because you can share some of it with a community of thoughtful others. I'll be sharing my list at the end of this week, that's on Friday, November 30 and if you're listening to this later in the year, you can find my lists at emilypfreeman.com

To make it even more fun, I have a free printable you can use to keep track of your own list - I'll link to it in the show notes but they are designed by season, both a 5x7 version and an 8x10 for those of you who write a bit bigger - and there's a version for both Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere so Australian listeners, your December-February list will say Summer instead of Winter. I'm going to try not to think about that for too long because the hemispheres they take me too long to figure out the season and all that.

Grab your own lists at emilypfreeman.com/learned

Well, as I already mentioned at the top of this episode, I'm so grateful for your enthusiastic acceptance of my announcement last week about *The Next Right Thing* book - you can reserve your copy online wherever books are sold and it will be shipped to you on April 2.

Mostly y'all, I'm just grateful I get to do this work. It is through practicing reflection and listening to my own life that led me to start a podcast in the first place - living, breathing evidence of the power of reflection and letting your life speak.

I hope you'll grab a copy of those reflection lists you can fill out again that's at emilypfreeman.com/learned. You don't have to share them with us, you can just fill them out on your own but it's definitely a fun resource if you want to have one place to keep all of your learning lists.

That's all I have for now. As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram [@emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman).

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.