



Episode 31: Be A Beginner

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 31.

If this is your first time joining me, I'm especially glad you're here. I often say this is a podcast for the second-guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue.

But I've heard from enough of you to know that even if you aren't one to second-guess yourself or if you never have trouble making a decision, these few minutes we have together on Tuesdays could also be the white space you need in your day, a speed bump in your week, a few minutes break from the constant stream of information and entertainment.

I've shared this number before but the internet tells us adults make over 30,000 decisions every day but I would guess when we are in the midst of a major life transition like a job change, engagement, a new house, a new baby, new school, injury or diagnosis, new responsibilities or even a crisis of faith well, the number of new decisions goes up and the weight of the *usual* ones are even heavier.

If you are in a time of transition, you are a prime candidate for decision fatigue.

During the month of April, I hope Tuesdays can be for you a time to re-focus, to receive what this transition has to teach you, and instead of running past it in excitement or running from it in fear, you will become curious about this unique time in your life.

Last month we circled loosely around the topic of letting go. Today, I'd like to introduce a new focus for the month of April: starting over. In the midst of a major life transition, what is our next right thing when we are starting something new? Listen in.

During my senior year of college, I got a full time job as a sign language interpreter at a local high school. This was really a big deal because part of our coursework as interpreters in training was to complete at least a semester internship. This was a requirement whether or not we got paid for it.

And so I was able to finish my senior year, satisfy my internship requirement, and earn money while doing it so I could pay my rent. Win-win-win.

Even though it was my full time job, I was still a student and so I had to have a supervisor come and evaluate my performance from time to time. Well, the very first time she came, I remember being proud to have her there, to show her what I was capable of and the good work I was doing.

At the end of the day, she handed me my evaluation and she had lovely things to say. She was kind and encouraging and I felt pretty proud of myself. Her evaluation scores reflected that and after she left, I scanned the page, past the numbers, past the check boxes and formalities because I wanted to see the comments she wrote at the bottom.

What does she say without a form to guide her? What comes spontaneously to her mind about me and my performance?

Quickly scanning her cursive writing at the bottom of that page, I was pleased to see she had good things to say, a few specific suggestions and generally positive feedback. Then at the very end, she summarized all that with a statement:

“Good work for a novice interpreter.”

Well! I did not know what “novice” meant, but I couldn’t wait to get home and look it up, no iPhones yet, just so you know. I imagined it meant something like “brilliant” or “impressive.” By the time I got home, I had convinced myself she thought I was probably a prodigy, some kind of savant, definitely way ahead of my time!

When I arrived home to my apartment, I logged on to my computer and asked Jeeves “what does novice mean?”

The answer was disheartening. It meant “a person new to or inexperienced in a field or situation.”

Blerg. She called me *a beginner*. The worst.

Obviously, this was not the worst, this was a compliment. She was saying “For someone new to the field, she is doing very well!”

But I liken this to how it felt after the twins were born and someone would say to me, “You look great for just having had two babies!”

It was the qualifier that was maddening - Why can't I just look great period? Why do I only look great for a person who just had twins?

As a new interpreter trying to find my way and establish my identity in the field, the shame of being a beginner was both heavy and invisible. I couldn't name it at the time, but that's what it was: it was shame. *Why was I only good for a beginner? Why couldn't I just be good, period?*

Sidenote: This whole podcast thing continues to humble me for one thing, I'm admitting to you how I turned a great evaluation into something negative. Embarrassment number one. I'm also admitting that as a college senior, I didn't know what novice meant. Embarrassment number two.

But I share that story to highlight this point: I didn't like being called a beginner even though that's exactly what I was.

Maybe you can relate.

I want to make a distinction here because I think it's important and I think it's overlooked.

When we talk about *new beginnings*, we usually frame the concept with phrases of hope like springtime, flowers blooming, a new love, a new start.

On a hard day, we encourage ourselves with tomorrow is a new day! Joy is going to come in the morning.

On January first, it's Happy New Year!

We just celebrated Easter and that is the ultimate symbol of hope, new life, and resurrection. Hallelujah.

New beginnings are usually welcome. But *being a beginner*? Not so much.

We want our circumstances to change, to start again, to be brand new.

But when they change, we often don't give ourselves permission to be new *within them*. Instead, we want to rush ahead to mastery. We think we ought to know how to navigate the newness, especially if it's something we wanted, something we prayed for, waited for, asked for, or planned.

A new beginning! Right on. But me, a beginner? No thank you.

I'm not sure where the shame of being a beginner originates. And maybe for you, this isn't an issue. I know for me, though, I don't like feeling like a beginner even when it's true.

In times of transition, being a beginner is a part of the stress. And it can be confusing especially when the new beginning is good.

So you got a new job or you started a new school. Yay! But you don't know the ropes, you don't know the best bathroom, you don't know the protocol for things, or your computer password. You don't know the inside jokes or where people eat lunch. The list of what you don't know feels endless.

If you are newly engaged or newly pregnant or if you are a new step-parent or just moved into a new house, you are grateful for the new role that you have and maybe excited about the future. But there's a lot you don't yet know and there isn't a handbook to teach you.

Maybe you are newly single or just divorced. You could be a recent empty nester or newly widowed. To say these things are hard is a massive understatement, an insult to the reality of

your current situation. On top of that, the truth is, *you don't know what you're doing* and there isn't a handbook to teach you.

All of these are new beginnings some joyful and some heartbreaking. But in all of these, you are a beginner. You have not been here before, with this particular set of circumstances, with these particular people, at this particular time in your one life.

All beginnings hold elements of both joy *and* heartbreak. When we enter a new beginning, we have generally also experienced some kind of ending which comes with layered emotions and experiences of grief, transition, and letting go.

And so I say all of this just to get us here: don't be afraid to be a beginner. Be relentlessly kind to yourself.

What if this is your next right step?

If you find yourself in a time of transition, whether it's something you've waited for or something that was put upon you against your will, here you are now, new.

Don't be afraid. Let yourself be a beginner. What would that look like for you today?

Maybe it means staying quiet when your instinct wants to speak out. It could mean asking a question rather than faking your way through. Maybe you are being invited to wait until you have more information, to move even if it feels like a risk or to say those three words that you don't feel comfortable saying, "I don't know".

Whatever your next actual step is, the first one is simply to accept your role as a beginner. This is a respectable, worthy place to be.

See if you can find a way to access the child you still are on the inside.

Our bodies age, but our souls stay young in so many ways always looking to be loved, to be safe, and to be welcomed. See if you can somehow connect to that child within you who doesn't have to know everything. Rather than be an expert, she is free to be curious. She is able to sit down and let other people know things for a change.

She is able to observe, to watch, to make mistakes, and to learn new things.

Your smallness is not a liability. Your smallness is a gift.

Remember Jesus, your King and your friend, your Savior and your Shepherd. You know what else he is? He is the smartest man who ever lived.

You may not know how to navigate this new beginning, but He does. With him by your side, you have everything you need.

Embrace this unique time of being a beginner. Let him teach you what is right, what to say, and how to think.

There will come a time when this new beginning will not be new anymore and you may not feel the need for him as you do now. So let this new role teach you what it has to teach you. Let it form you into the likeness of Christ.

Let yourself be a beginner and receive all the gifts beginning has to give.

Oh God,

We confess our longing to be the smartest person in the room.

Reveal to us the true fear hiding beneath the surface.

We are afraid of not having the answer.

We are afraid of looking like a fool.

We are afraid that perhaps they were right and we aren't cut out for this after all.

We are afraid of being a beginner.

As we fall from the crumbling wall of our own reputation, status, and ability, we trust You are the solid ground beneath our tired feet.

As we face those who have doubted us the most, remind us how You stand in front of us, behind us, beside us, and within us.

When we look for courage elsewhere, remind us to turn to You instead.

You have all the gumption and moxie we could possibly need.

We accept our smallness in Your presence.

Replace our shame with laughter and our doubt with love.

Teach us to begin again with joy.

Thanks for listening to episode 31 of The Next Right Thing.

Speaking of transitions, I'm glad to hear from those of you who say this podcast is helping you in the midst of them.

A special shout out to listener Dani White who said, "I didn't realize how many decisions I made every day/week/month until I started listening to this podcast!"

Right? I hear you on that, Dani.

Lauren says: "The Next Right Thing began while I moved into my apartment for my last semester of college. I listened to it while I unpacked boxes and leaned into a season of finishing things. Then, I graduated and began a career in children's ministry. Your words were a grace to me in such wild transition and a time of uncertainty."

I'm glad to hear that, Lauren. What a gift.

If you would like to connect beyond the podcast, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and also online at emilypfreeman.com

As always, we provide transcripts for every episode that you can find at thenextrightthingpodcast.com - just click on episode 31.

In closing, I have two resources I wanted to share with you as you embrace your status as a beginner.

One is a brand new book out TODAY by one of my favorite authors.

Her name is Leeana Tankersley and her book is called fittingly "Begin Again". I got my hands on an early copy last year, gladly endorsed it, and now I recommend it to you. As we talk about starting over this month I'm certain I'll be quoting her beautiful words more than once.

The second resource I want to tell you about is especially for writers. If you (or someone you know) is a writer but are struggling with the gap that exists between writing your words and

sharing those words with a reader, check out the online membership site I co-founded called Hope*writers.

For two years I've been co-leading this community of working writers dedicated to the success and creativity of each member.

Today is a fun day for us as we are releasing a redesign and would love for you to check it out and see if it might be a good fit for you. If you are a writer, a blogger, or an author and have ever felt the familiar and uncomfortable tension between writing your words and publishing them, check us out at hopewriters.com — but do it soon.

Because, we're closing the doors at the end of the week and when we re-open next, we will be raising the price. We would love to have you check it out.

And so let yourself be a beginner. It might require a smallness you're not used to. Wess Stafford who is the former president of Compassion International once said in his book, *Too Small to Ignore*: “So far as we see in reading the Gospels, Jesus never admonished children to become more grownup. He did, however, exhort grownups to become more like children.”

May it be so in us as we learn how to embrace our role as a beginner.