



Episode 33: Gather Co-Listeners

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 33.

I'm all about creating space for your soul to breathe so that you can discern your next right thing in love.

I work hard to make sure these episodes are relentlessly helpful and mercifully short.

Because if you're desperate to discern your next right step, the last thing you need is a rambling podcast host.

In the last episode, episode 32, I shared with you the story I realized my inbox was telling me - that in the midst of a time in my life where I lacked clarity, I was over-dosing on a good thing.

I collected gurus. Essentially for me, these were the right teachers at the wrong time.

While it's true we often need teachers and mentors to help us take our next right step, I tend to rush to other voices before I've taken the time to listen to my own voice as it is united with the voice of God.

What I learned is the importance of crafting a vision in quietness and then finding the teachers who can help me implement that vision with a plan. You can find more of that story at Episode 32: Stop Collecting Gurus.

But this week, if you have a big decision to make and you've taken the time to settle in and listen to the heartbeat of your own life, you may still feel unsettled with what comes next.

This week, I'll share some teachers available to us in our lives that we often overlook.

Perhaps you don't need a collection of gurus as much as you need a group of co-listeners. Here's how I found mine.

In episode 24, I told you the story of what happened after my husband, John, quit his job. How in the midst of a hard time, we wanted answers but all we got was arrows. And as it turned out, those arrows led us home - just not in the way we thought.

That episode was mostly the whole story but one part I left out I want to fill in for you today. How one of the arrows that led us on the journey pointed straight back to our own community.

I won't rehash the whole story here since I've told it before but I will summarize and say John and I were in the midst of a vocational transition and we were looking for arrows and kept sensing God just leading us right back to each other.

Looking back on that time, it felt kind of like a maze that looked like a normal maze except when you worked it, the end was also the beginning. You come out the same way you went in. And so you work it again thinking maybe you missed something along the way but it just keeps bringing you back to where you started.

And so in the midst of that season of not knowing what was next (even more than the typical un-knowing what was next we all carry every day) we were following arrows through the grief of losing John's dad, to one another, and arrows to the heart of God.

Another arrow that showed itself quite clearly to us at that time was one pointing straight at community.

When we weren't sure what do to next, we decided to intentionally gather some people we loved to come to our house, listen to us say words, and then see what they had to say back to us.

We weren't asking for advice exactly, although we were open to it.

We knew better than to ask for answers, though we always hoped for those.

Instead, we just didn't want to feel so alone. We wanted some people we loved and trusted to hear what we were saying, to see if there was something obvious we were missing, and to be with us in the midst of our uncertainty.

And so, we made a list.

I wrote down a list of people and then John wrote a list separately. Then we compared lists and saw we basically had written down the same people on the list.

We didn't want to just ask our closest friends, although of course a few of them were. But we also wanted to make sure we had some people in different life stages than we were, people who had been around longer than we have and who had different perspectives than maybe we did.

I won't ever forget the feeling I had when we sat in our living room and I listened to John tell this group of trusted friends about his grief, about his desire, and about his hope for the future.

They listened. They understood. They saw us and heard us, asked us questions and prayed for and with us. And then they agreed to do it again with us months later.

It was from these few sessions with our co-listening group that our next right step eventually became clear.

At that time, that felt like the purpose. But over time, I've realized that part was secondary.

Sometimes it looks like you're going nowhere, or that you're headed in the wrong direction. But maybe none of that is the point.

Maybe instead, the point is being honest about where you are and about what you need. And then looking around in your own community for people to walk with you.

I spent years wishing people would support me only to later realize I was waiting around for something to come to me when I was perfectly capable of going out and getting it.

I'm convinced God is less interested in where we end up than he is in who we are becoming.

Whether we're employed or unemployed, encouraged or discouraged, filled with vision or fumbling in the fog, more than anything, our Father just wants to be with us. And the most common way he shows his with-ness to us? Is in the actual, physical presence of other people.

The way that we intentionally gathered some people for the purpose of discernment might not be for everyone, but if you're in a season of transition or have a huge decision in front of you and you just feel kind of stuck, hearing yourself say words in the company of some people you trust will be immensely valuable.

Gathering a group of people around you for the purpose of listening is not a new idea.

A lot of us do this naturally in our families, maybe we do it with a group of friends or a small group or community group at our church.

Some faith traditions do this as part of a regular practice.

At the time when John and I met with our co-listeners, I had never heard of the Quaker practice of a Clearness Committee but this is a discernment process they use which is a method of listening designed to draw on the wisdom of other people. The job of those appointed to the Clearness Committee is to help someone discover whether there is clarity to move forward with a particular matter, whether they should wait, or if they should take other action.

Parker Palmer describes this committee as the Quaker's answer to the question of how to deal with personal questions and problems since they didn't have clerical leaders —so they turned to one another.

What John and I did by gathering a group we called co-listeners definitely shares some of the characteristics of the Quaker Clearness Committee but just to be clear, we didn't know anything about that at the time.

Still, it's actually a fascinating process to me and I'll put a link in the show notes if you want to read more about that for yourself if you, like me, don't know a lot about it.

If you're in a time of transition and want to gather your own co-listening group, here are just some simple things to keep in mind.

First - you might be wondering why. Why not just talk to your friends or to your community group?

Well, you can and should do both of those things.

But there's something really powerful about gathering people specifically for the purpose of listening, question asking, and reflection. At the very least, it will force you to do some deep thinking about the issue you're trying to discern in this transition because you'll want to be ready for the co-listeners questions and insights.

You'll want to ask people who don't just talk to hear themselves talk, but people who are thoughtful and good question-askers.

I cannot express to you how informal our co-listening gathering was. Still, even though we didn't exactly know what we were doing, it was so helpful!

Second, these people need to know you well.

If you're gathering a group, they don't all have to know one another but they do all need to know you. They have to be people you feel safe enough with so that you don't fear they will be judgey about your twisty, weird, insecure fears. There doesn't have to be very many of them - even two people sitting with you, listening to you, and being willing to ask you some questions could provide a lot of help and support for you. Be willing to look beyond your normal, everyday circles of people. You might be surprised who comes to mind.

Finally, you have to ask them.

I know this seems really obvious, but maybe you need the practical reminder. Reach out. State your need. Don't apologize.

If they are unable to meet with you, let them say so.

When you do meet, respect their time. Have a loose agenda, be as honest as you can, and try not to opinion manage.

Keep the request short, to the point, and tell them you don't expect them to give you answers but simply would love to have their kind, listening presence to help you process this decision or transition.

Tell them you would simply like to have people you can trust who will hear you, keep your confidence, and ask you simple questions.

We didn't exactly do ours this way, but I would offer a suggestion to the group to simply ask you questions rather than give you advice.

Now, maybe to you, this sounds a little too good to be true. A co-listening group? Don't I wish!

Remember it doesn't have to be fancy. They don't have to be your best friends in the world. There does' have to be a gaggle of them.

This is just one suggestion for if you are staring a big decision in the face and you aren't sure where to turn.

Now I guess I can't say this next part for sure, but knowing our Father, our friend Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who lives and dwells within us? My guess is that he isn't so concerned with the outcome of our decision at least not in the same way we are. But he would be delighted to know that the decision we are carrying is moving us toward community and not away from it, that it is leading us to depend on others more and not less, and that it is turning our

face toward his with a posture of listening with the hopeful expectation of receiving an answer.

If this hard decision can do all that? Then maybe we don't have to worry so much about what's going to happen next. Rather we can sit down on the inside and receive what's happening now, within us, beneath the rowdy surface, in the quiet center of our soul.

If you're standing at the crossroad of transition and you aren't sure which way to go, take heart - the Lord is always with you and within you, beside you and before you.

He is not impatient, he is not angry, he is not overwhelmed by you.

He is not frustrated, fed up, or afraid.

He is filled with compassion toward you and his banner over you is love.

Now as you seek people in your life who can stand beside you, and as you are becoming a person who stands beside others, "May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Thanks for listening to Episode 33 of The Next Right Thing.

If you would like to connect beyond the podcast, I post almost daily to Instagram where you can find me @emilypfreeman and you can also find me over at emilypfreeman.com

We provide a transcript for each episode, so if you know someone who either can't hear or prefers reading to listening, you can download those transcripts at thenextrightthingpodcast.com. Just click on Episode 33 for this one.

As I've said before, it is an honor to help you create a little space for your soul to breathe each week — though this might sound ironic seeing as how I've been talking for about 15 minutes or so, I do see my work as a ministry of listening. If nothing else, I hope our time

together helps you to listen to your own life with a bit more awareness and hope than you maybe would have otherwise done.

This podcast isn't the only way I do that, though. I am also, at my core, a writer. Every month I send out a letter where I share a short reflection, some first word news, and a list of the books I'm reading right now. If you'd like to receive that letter, visit emilypfreeman.com/letter - the link is right there in the show notes as well.

In closing, some final wise words on listening from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *Life Together*:

“It is God’s love for us that he not only gives us his word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.”

Thanks for listening and I will see you next week.