



110: Build for the Years You Can't See

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 110. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or even if you're great at making decisions, but in your current season of life, you could use a reminder to simply do the next right thing. Well then, you're in the right place.

I've said it before, that this idea of doing the next right thing is not one I made up. It's a phrase that's been repeated and passed down by the greats like Mother Teresa, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, Alcoholics Anonymous, Theodore Roosevelt, Elizabeth Elliott, Anne Lamott, as well as Princess Anna in Frozen, too. It's often the simplest phrases that have the power to change our lives. Phrases like "I love you" and "I'm sorry" and "You're not alone."

For me, and so many others, "just do the next right thing" is one of those life-changing phrases as well. Not because it's so fancy, but because it's so simple. Since adults make over 35,000 decisions every single day, it's no wonder that this idea of doing the next right thing feels like such a relief, but there are also times when doing the next right thing doesn't seem like enough. Maybe you've been practicing this simple discipline for a while now and still it's not leading where you thought it would lead, and it's not bringing results you hope to see by now. If you can relate, listen in.

When John and I first brought the twins home from the hospital, I was secretly horrified that the doctors let us take them home. They were tiny, baby girls born seven weeks too early, and I remember wondering if a responsible grownup should be in charge. I'm not the only parent to feel that way. I've heard lots of other parents say similar things. We didn't feel capable, but we didn't have the luxury of waiting for our feelings to catch up with our reality. There was just too much work to do.

Whether you're a parent or not, you most likely know that parenting babies is tedious and hard and magical and the worst and also rewarding and thankless, and sometimes it's all of those things in the same five minutes. But the one advantage we have as humans in the world who parent babies is you know that the goal is not for them to remain babies. The goal is for them to grow up,

and there is a lot of evidence around us pointing to the fact that this is what happens. Babies grow up.

Parents for the most part in the big picture scheme of things, we understand that a lot of what we do is laying the groundwork, planting the seeds and building for the years we can't see. And so that's one thing in parenting, but what about in other areas of life that have less of a track record? What about in areas where we're trying something new, and we don't really know anybody else who's doing it?

Maybe we make that big decision, and we listen to our life, and we decide to answer the invitation to create, to make a change, to write a book, to foster a child, or make a move or do something different than the status quo. And then we get into the daily grind of that work and at first it's great and maybe hard, but it feels worth it. But eventually we find out as much like parenting a newborn. One day after the next, each day, the same as the one before. Nothing major really happens. There's lots of exhaustion and before we know it, there's a question always lurking beneath the surface.

Did I make the right choice?

Am I wasting my time?

One example of that for me was when I finally said "yes" to pursuing writing as a job. Now of course it wasn't like I woke up one day and was like, "I'm going to become a writer, I'm going to do that now." It was gradual, but after I made that decision and then once I started doing the work of a writer, that's when the doubt started to creep in.

At first, I felt like I was waiting for a feeling of competency and then I thought maybe I got this whole calling thing wrong since I just felt so inadequate in the work. Now, I see that can be a gift if I want it to be. We don't have to wait to feel qualified, certified, or professional. Instead, we can work from a small, curious and willing place, no matter what the work is. And from that place, if we look around, we'll see countless brave strugglers doing the work around us and we'll be happy to be among them. We are not alone.

Another thing I learned as I began to write was that embracing my limitations is actually better than fighting them. There's a temptation to think that, "Man, if I only had more time or more energy or money or talent, or if I could just see more results quicker, then I could finally reach my potential." But I'm learning the importance of listening to my limits to see what they might have to teach me even when my elements are just short vision and an inability to see the results as quickly as I want to. Instead of holding me back from what I think I should be doing, perhaps those limitations can lead me forward into the work that's meant just for me.

Finally, I learned the work I love and choose, it's still work. I can say with a fair amount of confidence that I'm living in step with my calling broadly. Still, as much as I really do love my

work and what I do, it helps to remember, it's still work. The great writers I admire don't wake up feeling inspired or breathing out sparkly dust of wisdom and talent every other minute. They wake up needing coffee in a shower just like I do, and then they get to work and often their process looks like a lot of hair twirling and window staring and procrastinating. They don't give up. They persevere through the boredom, the discouragement, the lack of results and the distractions to create work that matters because they believe it matters and they trust that it will eventually somehow live beyond them. I may admire and learn from others, but I don't disrespect their work by romanticizing their process. Work we love is still hard work. It helps me to remember that.

One of my girls is a sophomore in high school now, but when she was in sixth grade, it might've been seventh grade, but I spent a day with her and her middle school band at an amusement park where they performed for very official looking judges. After their performance, they found out that they earned a superior rating, which is the highest rating that you can get as a middle school band.

Well, it was a big deal for their little band the first time that they've scored that high. My daughter, who at the time was the only female trumpet player, was thrilled. After the excitement of their score, the kids dispersed into the park to voluntarily strap themselves into metal cars and allow their bodies to be hurled through time and space at ridiculous speeds, while I walked with their band director on two feet and at a slow pace, the way God intended humans to travel, thank you very much.

Still overcome with their success, the band director, she told me that five years ago she brought the kids here to this same park for the same competition and she said they were terrible. She said, "We didn't even get a plaque with any rating at all, much less a superior."

I thought about that for a while afterwards. Five years ago, these particular students weren't even in middle school yet, but the work she did with the band in the past five years built up and each year they improved. In fact, that next year, after the year they earned a superior rating at the competition, the band director told me that she had a record number of sixth graders signed up for beginning band. And now that I've talked about the band way too much, I just have to say this, it all counts.

All the work you're doing towards that thing you're doing, the tiny steps forward, the little bit here, the little bit there. The embarrassment of what feels like failure, the lack of recognition, the waiting and the listening, it all counts. Nothing is wasted, but, and here's the hard part for me, there's no guarantee you'll be around to see the results, to get the credit or to celebrate the outcome.

There's a quote I love and kind of hate that says, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." And get this. I tried to find out who said that quote and irony of ironies, it's unclear. Ronald Reagan, Harry S Truman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Edward Montague, and Bob Woodruff are all quoted as having said it or having said some version of it.

Well that seems fitting. Working without guarantee of success is one thing, but working without guarantee of even knowing how it will turn out one way or another, that takes faith. I wonder how the world and our daily lives would be different if we approached our tasks, our relationships and our everyday work with a willingness to, in the words of the poet Henry Newbolt, “Billed for the years, we shall not see.”

May we bring all we’re doing into the presence of Christ with an open hand leaving outcomes and results in his care as we simply do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 110 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this invitation to build for the years you can’t see can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it’s true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth, you know, is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

This year marks 14 years since I first started writing on the internet. It marks nine years since my first book came out, and nearly five years since I co-founded Hope*Writers, a membership community for writers who want to write meaningful words without sacrificing our meaningful lives.

Though my first book didn’t release until 2011, I actually started working on it in 2008 and that’s already more numbers and more dates than I plan to share with you. But I say it all to make the simple point that for years I worked on it without really ever knowing if it would be a book at all. Some days it felt like a waste of time, I’ll be honest, but not today. Today I can look back and see that work was worth it and listen, it’s not because it was published, it’s because the published work is evidence that I showed up as myself with what I had to offer. And so I hope that these words have been an encouragement to you, no matter the kind of work you’re doing.

But if you are doing the work of writing and you want some help in the process, Hope*Writers is open for new members from now until the end of this week, January 17th. If you’ve been writing in private but wonder what it would take to get your words into the hands of a reader, well that’s why we exist, we help writers like you find and follow your own path to publication. Whether that means publishing on a website, an email, an article or a book. Essentially, we help you pivot from writing in secret to writing for a reader. You can find out more at hopewriters.com.

And you can find out where you are specifically on the writing path. Here’s a clue. You are already on the writing path. There’s no such thing as a writer who is not on the writing path. To find out where you are in the six-stage writing path, visit hopewriters.com/quiz to get started. We would love to see you there. Again, that’s at hopewriters.com/quiz to get started. Or if you know you want to jump in and join right now, visit us at hope_writers.com/join.

Well in closing, I wanted to read you our Hope*Writer manifesto because even though it's specifically for writers, I know, I actually think it can be an encouragement for most any kind of work that we do, especially when we're not sure if we'll ever see the results. So here it is.

We write meaningful words without sacrificing our meaningful life.

We are still real writers even if we never write a book.

We build benches, not platforms.

We know how to hustle without losing our heart.

We champion the success of other writers.

We don't wait to write until we feel qualified, picked, or inspired.

We believe we have a message to share and a reader to serve.

We refuse to take our work or ourselves too seriously.

We understand fear is normal. That courage gets the final say.

We celebrate progress and take our next right step in love.

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