



## 87: Create Space

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 87.

This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place. I'll always share a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

A quick thanks to those of you who have left reviews in Apple podcasts like KS Coffee Girl left one in May saying, "Tuesdays have grown to be my favorite day of the week because of the 10-15 minutes spent listening to The Next Right Thing podcast." She says, "it helps me make space to think about who I am and what's important in life, keeping me grounded with some time for reflection and Jesus. And now The Next Right Thing book has helped me through making a hard but important big decision."

Thrilled to hear it KS Coffee girl and grateful to hear from you, too whether you've left a review, many of you sent me an email, commented on a blog post, or sent me a DM on Instagram to let me know this little podcast has helped you make actual decisions in your real life, whether big or small.

There's nothing magical about what I talk about here. I don't give secret weapons for making decisions. Unless you count creating space as a secret weapon which, if I'm honest, I kind of do. By listening you're prioritizing some time to think, to reflect, to receive a bit of direction or encouragement in your own life to slow down, take a deep breath, and simply do your next right thing even if you have a million things to do.

So here's to you for creating that space — because I could talk all day long into a microphone and upload it to the internet. But if you don't listen, then no space has really been made. So thanks for listening. And way to go for prioritizing space for your soul.

That's what this is you know. For over 13 years I've been writing under that headline: *creating space for your soul to breathe*. I stand by it as a foundational practice for all of us (not just those of us with introverted personalities or who gravitate toward the contemplative tradition). It's for everyone.

Creating space for the soul is part of being a healthy human. But I understand for some of us that phrase, creating space for your soul to breathe, sounds delightful. But for others, not so much.

What does it mean to create space for the soul and why does it matter?  
Great questions. Listen in.

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Last spring, after leading a women's weekend in Southern California, John and I stayed a few days longer in Carlsbad for some rest before we headed back east. On a slow walk through town, we wandered into a local book shop, the kind where the books seem like they've been there since pretty much forever like the dawn of time and the bookstore owner watches you as you browse, I felt almost as if he's daring you to buy a book and I didn't want to in a way because I felt it might disrupt the Eco-system he's created; like the whole bookshop might fall apart if we remove one book from the shelves.

I felt more comfortable right outside the doors where some discounted books were stacked on carts. One marked a dollar caught my eye based on the title alone. It was called "*The Solace of Open Spaces*".

I'd never heard of the author, Gretel Ehrlich, but I bought the book based on the title and a short endorsement by an author I had read, Annie Dillard. *It's only a dollar*, I thought. *If nothing else, the title alone had already brought me at least a dollars worth of thoughtful reflection.* The name of the book, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, was so compelling to me.

I have a friend who's afraid of open spaces. I don't understand it but I totally respect it. For me, open space is hopeful phrase, a hopeful concept, it's a comfort, a promise of possibility.

Last night John and our son were on an evening drive together (they do that sometimes) and I got a text from them telling me to go outside and look at the moon. They know how much I love to see the moon in all her stages but especially when she's close to full and last night, she was. I rushed outside but I knew I wouldn't see that moon. The trees surround our house on all sides and by the time the moon rises high enough to see, she's lost all illusions of grandeur. But still, I went outside and looked.

I love those lush green trees. But I long for open space. Most of the time.

For all the ways I crave space in my surroundings, I have a tendency to avoid it in my soul. When it comes to confronting the reality of our inner life, it's not all full moons and rolling hills is what I'm saying.

Like I mentioned before, for years I've been writing online beneath the tagline *creating space for your soul to breathe*. So space, in word and concept, is something I think about often. What does that mean? What's the purpose? What's the point?

If you've been around on planet earth for five minutes these days, I'm sure you've heard the mantras that people like to say: be yourself, take care of yourself, protect yourself, love yourself, defend yourself, and express yourself. But, in the words of John Ortberg in his book *Soul Keeping*:

“What if your *self* is a train wreck? What do you do then? The more obsessed we are with our selves, the more we neglect our souls.”

Creating space for your soul is not self-obsession. It's self-awareness in the presence of God.

For many years I've considered the soul to be that part of you that houses your mind (the thoughts you think), your emotions (the things you feel), and your will (the choices you make). In short, I've heard it said that our souls are a combination of our thinker, our feeler, and our chooser.

Add them together and what have you got? Your soul!

I still think that for the most part, but I'm not sure it's so easily outlined anymore. We worship an incomprehensible God, both knowable and mysterious at the same time.

As people who are made in his image, we are perhaps more incomprehensible than we are outline-able. So I want to respect the mystery that is humanity while, at the same time, not make our souls more mysterious than they need to be.

Soul whiplash is real, though, isn't it? I can define that one pretty well. It happens to the most faithful and spiritually mature among us.

I've talked about this before, way back in Episode 7, about how when I picture the shape of our soul, I imagine it as a circle curved in on itself.

Our soul needs a fixed point around which to evolve. What we put in that center is our choice but the results will show up in how we live, how we relate, and how we see the world.

If what's going on in my life right now is at the center, that's what my soul will revolve around, as evidenced by the shame and anxiety I feel when I'm behind, rejected, embarrassed, you name it.

Good circumstance leads to good feelings and experience. Bad circumstance leads to bad feelings and bad experience. It's a cycle and we're all caught up in it. And that is what leads to soul whiplash.

In his book, *Soul Keeping*, John Ortberg says, "If your soul is healthy, no external circumstance can destroy your life. If your soul is unhealthy, no external circumstance can redeem your life."

To keep our soul healthy, first we have to admit that invisible things are real, as real as love, hope, loyalty, and excitement.

You can't touch them or point to them, but we experience them every single day because they're as real as your living room sofa or the trees in your front yard.

Yes, invisible things are real, but real in a different way. We can't easily diagnose a sick soul and give it a spoonful of medicine to fix it, not exactly. When your arm is broken, it's obvious you need help. What about when your heart is broken?

And so our invisible soul is often forgotten beneath the demands of everyday life.

So creating space for your soul is simply your invitation to remember it. We can decide on purpose to create space for our soul to breathe so that we remember where we live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God.

Because it's easy to get tangled up in a fast-paced world: driven, distracted, and productive. But that's a language the soul doesn't speak. We can go on that way for many years. Many of us do.

Creating space for my soul to breathe is about respecting the daily pauses we need to be fully ourselves so that we can be present with God and faithful in our home, our work, and our community.

If you feel like creating space for your soul seems too much like being lazy and doing nothing, then maybe this will help: It actually takes more work to create margin than it does to stay busy.

Busy is the default. Margin takes intention. I know I'm talking a lot about the concept of creating space and in our next episode, I'll share a bit more practically what that could look like. But first, here's the secret that's hard to believe: there's still value in creating space for the soul even if you have nothing to show for it.

Spending time in the presence of God without an agenda does not come naturally for most of us. But how desperately we need it.

I'm nearly finished with Gretel Erlich's book. It's a story her story but not so much a chronological one. It's organized more as a collection of essays and for some there may be too

much meandering in her writing. As for me, I like her style though it takes some time to settle into. Once I do, I'm always glad because as I read about her life in Wyoming, I'm struck by the personality of this open space she writes about. It's romantic in thought but gritty, earthy, and dangerous in reality. It's offensive, this Western space, filled with wild animals and death and harsh extremes - too much snow in winter, not enough water in summer. Almost everything is abundant, but not always in the right direction.

Still when I imagine space in my mind, it's compelling to me. I'm drawn to it.

Erlich points out when we see space, as Americans we gravitate toward filling it.

She writes, "We Americans are great on fillers, as if what we have, what we are, is not enough. We have a cultural tendency toward denial, but, being affluent, we strangle ourselves with what we can buy. We have only to look at the houses we build to see how we build *against* space, the way we drink against pain and loneliness."

Man, I'm glad I paid that \$1 for that book. When I read it the first time I'd stop, I'd read it again, I'd read it out loud to John, because facing the space on the inside can feel that way, too. We'll see the all the extremes of our own shortcomings, all the ways we aren't quite living the life we long to live. Why would we choose to face all that on purpose? Well, simply because if we turn our back on the shadows within us, we're also turning our back on the light. If we refuse to see the extreme of our own shortcomings, we'll also miss the abundance of God's full-hearted love, the comfort of his presence, the peace that goes beyond what makes sense to us.

As we begin to turn inward, we may first see empty nothingness. But in time, it may turn into sacred space instead. This practice of a transformed perspective does not come quickly. In the words of Margaret Guenther in her book, *Holy Listening*, "As a people, we are not comfortable with waiting. We see it as wasted time and try to avoid it, or at least fill it with trivial busyness. We value action for its own sake. It is hard to trust in the slow work of God."

And so together let's pray because our souls rely on our bodies to make our invisible condition visible. May we learn to pay attention. May we be sensitive to the signs.

Father, may you be our vision as we walk into the darkness.

Transform our emptiness into sacred space.

Be our patience as we trust in your slow work and simply do our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 87 of The Next Right Thing.

I know this reflection has been somewhat abstract. In our next episode I plan to bring it down to earth. What are some practical ways to create space in our lives? How does this look on a Tuesday? On a weekend? In the summertime?

We'll talk about that and more but first, this week I'm headed to London to co-lead a trip with Tsh Oxenreider. We call it Literary London and together with 8 other women I'll be one part tourist, one part pilgrim as we explore the homeland of some of the greatest storytellers in the world. If you want to follow along during our travels, you can check out two hashtags on Instagram: #literarylondon and #travelswithtsh that Tsh (no I).

This will only be the second trip we've led together but it's fast become one of my favorite things because as much as this trip is about seeing London and learning of some of her storytellers, it's also about creating space for participants to listen to our lives, to God, to each other what that might mean moving forward. We never know exactly how these conversations will go and the mystery of it all is one of my favorite parts.

You can always find me there @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com

In closing, here are some final words from Ehrlich's book about space and the value it holds:

“Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us. My grandchildren will probably use space shuttles for a honeymoon trip or to recover from heart attacks, but closer to home we might also learn how to carry space inside ourselves in the effortless way we carry our skins. Space represents sanity, not a life purified, dull, or ‘spaced out’ but one that might accommodate intelligently any idea or situation”

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