



106: Let's Talk About Disney's Frozen 2!

Hi there. It's Emily. Today's episode will have spoilers about Disney's new animated film, *Frozen 2*. Months before the movie released, previews of some of the songs were made available, and one of those songs was called The Next Right Thing. Well, as host of The Next Right Thing podcast and the author of *The Next Right Thing* book, you know I cannot resist dedicating at least one episode to a conversation about this movie. And I tried to come up with a way to talk about it without giving away spoilers, but it became a creative impossibility. So if you haven't seen the movie yet and you want to see it spoiler-free, save this episode as your post-viewing listening reward. This is your fair warning. Beep, beep. Okay, now on to today's spoiler-rich episode.

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 106. This is a podcast about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life. For over two years, I've been creating these weekly episodes about how doing the next right thing can transform our daily decisions, and as a result, our whole lives. In that same two years, I also wrote and released a book by the same name. So as you can imagine, these days, the next right thing has become a mantra, a prayer, and a normal part of my everyday life.

It's fascinating, though not surprising, how often this idea of choice is not only a main player in our lives but it's the foundation of every storyline in the books we read, the shows we watch, and the movies we go see. The protagonist starts out in one less-than-ideal situation, and then is faced with a choice that leads her on a journey of choices, and eventually to an ultimate choice that has the potential to open up a whole new world of experience and possibility. That's the basic storyline of every storyline.

The Next Right Thing with Emily P. Freeman

Now, for the past several months, I've been receiving DMS, emails, text messages, and more kinds of messages from readers and listeners, friends and family about the new animated Disney movie, *Frozen 2*. The messages started off slow. The first one came months ago in my Instagram DMS with a link to The Next Right Thing song in the movie. Well, since then, the messages have picked up their speed, especially since Kristen Bell, who plays Anna in the movie, posted a teaser of the song on her Instagram account.

Well, I finally saw the movie last weekend, and now I have so many thoughts, happiness, and thoughtfulness, and ideas and perspective. I don't know where to start. Some of my reflections are about the movie itself, the characters, and the plot, and the spoilers, FYI. More broadly, though, I've been thinking about a series of questions that I've received dozens of times since people have learned about the song in the movie. People want to know:

- 1.) Did I help write the song?
- 2.) Did someone at Disney listen to the podcast?
- 3.) Do I know Kristen Bell?

Which underneath, these questions really is just one big question, which is this: Did Disney steal your idea?

Well, the answer, that most of you know, is no. I'm not the first person who's used this phrase, and you know I won't be the last, obviously. But the question has come up often enough that it seemed like a good idea to address it, so I'll do that here as well as share my own thoughts about the movie all coming up in this special *Frozen 2* episode of The Next Right Thing. Listen in.

In September 2015, *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert released and became an instant New York Times bestseller. In November of that same year, I started listening to the audio version of that book as I drove around town. One of my favorite lines in the book was about fear. She says, "Your fear is like a mall cop who thinks he's a Navy SEAL. He hasn't slept in days. He's all hopped up on Red Bull, and he's liable to shoot at his own shadow in an absurd effort to keep everyone 'safe.'"

Her whole book is really just one long permission slip, and it states: you are allowed to be here.

It was an easy book to listen to, mainly because I see myself as someone who's already living a creative life. Not every moment of every single day, but the path I've chosen to walk is pointing in that direction. And while my own mall cop fear still shouts out warnings at me all the time, I'm mostly able to see him for what he is.

Now, I don't see my writing on the same plane as Elizabeth Gilbert's by any stretch of anyone's imagination. But as I listened to her read *Big Magic*, I was pleased by this one thought. I'm so relieved I already wrote my own *Big Magic*. It's called *A Million Little Ways*, and it came out two years earlier in 2013.

I don't mean for that to sound like I'm comparing my little book with her big book, but what I do mean to say is I'm glad I did the work to write *A Million Little Ways* when I did. To wrestle it to the ground. To catch those ideas and put them into sentences and subject myself to the grueling editorial process and the difficult task of writing a whole book. I said what I wanted to say when I wanted to say it. If other people say it, too, then that affirms the significance of the work. Everyone wins.

But what if instead I had considered back in 2012 and '13 how hard it would be to take those wispy, swirling thoughts that I had about art, and creativity, and living our lives in the creative image of God and decided to put them aside in a drawer somewhere for later? And instead of writing them down and doing the work, what if I had waited and had decided it was too hard and didn't do the work at all?

Well, if that had been my story, then I'll admit listening to *Big Magic* would have been a distinctly different experience for me. Every writer feels it at least once, except maybe a thousand times more than once, that someone else has written their book. I'm not saying ideas are never stolen, words are never plagiarized, and that every lookalike work is just a coincidence. No, it does happen. It's happened to me on a smaller scale many, many times. But what I see happen more often than that is the fear of stolen ideas keeps writers from writing and keeps artists from making.

Good work is kept hidden because of the fear that someone will copy the idea, take the credit, and run away with the success and the life meant for them. Again, I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but I am

saying that our fear of it happening can keep us from good work, from life-giving collaboration, and from our God-given calling in this world.

When someone else says what I'm saying, too, it's affirmation. But if I never find the courage to say it in the first place, and then someone says it instead, that's when regret sets in. And I'm actually more afraid of that than of being copied.

When I listened to *Big Magic* back in 2015, Elizabeth Gilbert walked the same circles around creativity that so many of us have walked around and then written about. And as I read her book, I was deeply grateful. Because while our perspective and worldview are vastly different, while our personality and our theology might not mix well, and while her book sits up high on bestseller lists while mine is mostly unknown by the majority of the population, still, I felt a certain kinship with Elizabeth Gilbert as I listened to her book.

I was thankful that I didn't feel threatened by the voice of another author saying similar things that I've said. Because the truth is a lot of us have said these things. Pick up any book on writing or creativity, and you'll read about all the same themes, fear, resistance, permission, inspiration, motivation, all of it. It isn't new.

But, here's something we often forget. Most people, well, we don't want new, not really, but we do want true. Our job is to keep saying things that are true. To do that, we need to have other artists circle with us, artists who are different from us, who are similar to us, who may be offensive to us, artists we're a little bit afraid of as well as artists who help us feel safe. We need to circle around the difficulty of creating with other people who are doing it, too, and we need to walk beside them with open hands, and willing hearts, and a stubborn refusal to compete and compare.

Well, these were my first thoughts when I learned about The Next Right Thing song in *Frozen 2*. I thought back to 2015 when *Big Magic* came out and how pleased I was that I had already written my own version of that book.

When I saw *Frozen 2* in the theater, the sequel to *Frozen*, which was the highest grossing animated film of all time, by the way, instead of worrying what this was going to take away from me, instead of

fearing how the big guys at Disney are now using a phrase that I've used for years, and maybe that's going to eclipse my voice. No, instead I found a great sense of satisfaction, even pride, that I get to be one of many stewards of this beautiful phrase, one that has been passed down from generations before me, and now, because of this cartoon princess, would be passed on more easily to the generations after me. What an absolute gift.

Now, that's not to say that plagiarism isn't a serious concern in some cases. It's not to say that we should copy each other's original ideas. No, and no. But it is to say that there's a public domain of work that we all get to play in. And from where I stand, the phrase "the next right thing" is part of that public domain. I've created my unique offerings around it, and it's a joy to see how other artists and makers are doing the same thing.

Frozen 2 is a movie about the love between sisters. The older sister, Elsa, does not consider herself better than the younger sister, Anna. Even though she's a queen with magical powers, there's no competition between them. Anna cheered Elsa on every step of the way, as the one with the unique calling to do a particular thing. She could have said, "What makes you so special? I'm a daughter, too," but she didn't. Instead, she affirmed Elsa's gifting and encouraged her to embrace it. At the end of the movie, we see Elsa do the same for Anna, finally acknowledging her role as queen is better suited for her sister.

Well, in addition to being a movie about the love between sisters, it's also a movie about listening to your life. Elsa hears a voice calling her from a distance, and she makes a decision to honor it and to listen to it. At the risk of drawing too many real-life conclusions from this animated kids' movie, I think a lot of us miss out on good things because we're too afraid to listen to our lives. Elsa made that hard choice, even though it required her to find courage she didn't think she had, to take steps that were unprecedented and to literally walk through the unknown.

I realize an argument could be made: *So what? We're just supposed to leave all our responsibility and go find ourselves in an enchanted forest?* Well, no. But when you look at the plot as a whole, I think we would agree that the royal family and the entire community ended up better off because Elsa honored that voice than they would've been if she had ignored it.

Finally, this is a movie about decisions, how the decisions made by those we admired from the past impact us and those in our future for better or for worse. It's about how the decisions we make when times are dark can be the actual path by which we finally find hope.

And that's the point where we hear *The Next Right Thing*, what the LA Times calls the movie's most sophisticated song sung by actor Kristen Bell, whose character Anna wrestles with the near paralyzing grief of not one but two major losses.

The first line of the song is, "I've seen dark like this before but not like this." And then she says, one of the saddest lines in the whole movie to me, "Hello, darkness. I'm ready to succumb."

Remember these lines are from one of the most optimistic, bubbly characters in the movie, which I think is what makes it so important. Grief is no respecter of personality. When asked about that particular point, about the assumption that optimistic people maybe don't grieve like everyone else, Kristen Bell responded in that article for the LA Times, and she said, "We all feel darkness that everyone feels, but we choose to go on. In this situation, you're watching someone choose life."

Now, going to the movie, I, of course, knew that there was a song called *The Next Right Thing*. That was the whole deal. But what I didn't know was that it would be the turning point in the plot. Doing the next right thing is what leads Anna from despair to hope, not all at once, but a little at a time. And that's the gift of this phrase. Because choosing to simply do the next right thing can be the turning point in the plot of our own lives as well, maybe not today or next week, but over time as we determined step by step what is just the next right thing. Eventually, we'll find our way through the fog of confusion, loneliness, discouragement, and grief, and that is where the inspiration for this song was born.

During the press junket for the first movie, *Frozen*, Chris Buck, the director, lost his 23-year-old son. His name was Ryder, and he had battled and apparently beat cancer only to be killed in a car accident less than a month before the first *Frozen* movie released.

In an interview on a podcast called *Inside Frozen 2*, Ginger Zee of ABC News interviews the husband and wife team who created the music for both of the movies, Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Bobby Lopez. And they said they watched their director go through this unimaginable loss as they were doing

press for that first movie. Kristen said she carried the question with her: How do you wake up the next day after that?

The first song they wrote for *Frozen 2* was *The Next Right Thing*. This was their answer to what to do when you've lost everything. She said this in that same interview on that podcast. She said, "Optimism is a choice, and it's not a choice to be happy forever. It's a choice to say, 'Okay, I'm going to take a breath. I'm going to sit up. I'm going to put one foot down. Then I'm going to put another foot down, and maybe I'll take those steps to the kitchen, make myself a sandwich so I can make it through the next hour.' We're breaking down grief into those tiny choices."

Then, she said my favorite line from the interview. She said, "I hope this song can be like a little prayer for anyone going through grief."

So there you have it. No matter what you're going through, a vocational transition, a relational tension, a new role, a new job, a loss of security, confidence, love, or the plan you thought you knew, the choice to do the next right thing belongs to all of us. We don't have to feel brave, have the answers, or know what's coming tomorrow. Instead, we can continue to ask ourselves the question, what is my next right thing right now? And then, we can take that step in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 106 of *The Next Right Thing*.

I've said a lot of words about *Frozen 2*. But believe it or not, I could say more. I could say more about what I've learned about Kristen and Bobby Lopez, who wrote the music and the lyrics, more about the creative process and the importance of releasing the work before you know how it's going to be received. And I didn't say how much I liked it. I really liked it. I especially love Olaf, who, like in the first movie, was brilliantly played by actor Josh Gad. I'm assuming if you've listened this far, then you've already seen the movie. But if you haven't, I do recommend it.

It's an honor to be a fellow steward of doing the next right thing along with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Elizabeth Elliot, poet Minnie Paul, writer Anne Lamott, author Brennan Manning,

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and now Princess Anna, who I secretly, but since I'm telling you not so secretly, see as my own little sister. Isn't it fun to talk about movies?

Thanks for hanging with me on this epic *Frozen 2* episode. Now for a few final words. December 12th will be the last day to purchase The Quiet Collection for Christmas. Since it's a 14-day devotional series delivered daily to your inbox, we want to be sure that the final day will arrive on or before Christmas, so that gives us a deadline of December 12th. You can visit emilypfreeman.com/christmas to learn more and receive that collection in your own inbox or gift it to someone you love. That's at emilypfreeman.com/christmas.

And of course, if you haven't picked up your own copy of The Next Right Thing book, you could always pair it with a copy of the Frozen soundtrack for a sisterly gift or a mother-daughter gift bundle. You're welcome for that idea.

Well, as always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or an Instagram at Emily P. Freeman. I'll leave you with some final words from *Frozen 2* lyrics from that song sung by Princess Anna.

I won't look too far ahead. It's too much for me to take. But break it down to this next breath, this next step. This next choice is one that I can make. So I'll walk through this night stumbling blindly toward the light and do the next right thing.

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