



127: Don't Try To Be Great

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 127.

This is a podcast about making decisions but also 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 for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step. In today's episode, I particularly have the class of 2020 in mind.

They're missing out on a lot as we know full well, and so I thought it fitting for me to dedicate at least one episode to these students to offer my sincere congratulations on a job well done to celebrate the milestone it is to come to the end of your high school or college career and to give a gentle nod to the parents, the teachers, the coaches, and the loved ones of our graduates. As you are also reaching the end of this experience, though it may be more quiet and reflective than it is for your graduate.

Of course, if you're not a graduate and you don't even know one, maybe you'll hear a little something that you can apply as well because aren't we all in transition? Aren't we always learning something new today? We'll put the pandemic aside for just a few minutes and give three cheers to these students, teachers, and families of this graduating class as best we can. Listen in.

In his book based on a commencement speech he gave at Dartmouth College in 2011, Charles Wheelan tells a story about how he was once a guest on a news program hosted by Chicago journalist Phil Ponce. Now the show is filmed live, so of course, if you mess up or say something you regret, there are no do-overs. There are only hundreds of thousands of pairs of eyes watching you do whatever it is you did or say whatever it is you said, polished or not just before airtime.

Charles, the writer, recalls how he was feeling right before. He said he was nervous, self-conscious, and hoping to impress in that very moment. Phil, the host, leaned over with just 30 seconds to live and said these words, Charles never forgot. "Don't try to be great, just be solid."

The book is called *10 1/2 Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said*, and in it, Charles Wheelan writes this, "That simple advice had a profound effect because I knew I could be solid. That was within my control. I could just talk about what I know. I could answer questions candidly. I could have a fun and interesting conversation with other guests. I might have some funny quips. I might not. Phil's advice was

liberating because it removed the pressure to deliver what I wasn't certain I could deliver, and it made me better at doing what I knew I could."

Again, the book is called *10 1/2 Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said*, and "don't try to be great" was number 10 1/2. Like many of you, I've been thinking a lot about this class of 2020 both, like I said, the high school graduates and the college graduates, too.

In addition to all of the end of year events, this graduating class is either missing out on or having to modify because of the pandemic. The truth remains, they're still graduating. They are moving into the world of grownups, and the expectations in this world can be well extreme to say the very least. This world is filled with people who are trying to be great in the same way. I hope doing the next right thing is a kind phrase for graduates to hold onto. I think Phil Ponce, his advice he gave to Charles Wheelan, seems like a relief as well.

Don't try to be great. Just be solid.

It's not the message we usually hear. After all, the phrase is "greatest of all time," not "soldest of all time." What does that even mean to be solid? Years ago, I listened to an interview with author Phil Anderson, who by the way is also a real life dear friend of ours here in North Carolina, but in the interview, Phil shared about his 30-year friendship with author and priest Brennan Manning.

In that interview, Phil says this about Brennan: "Here's a guy who's famous for what he has to say. Yet what I remember most about him was how he sat and listened. He touched my life with his kindness."

So Phil Brennan was solid. Another story comes to mind about Brennan himself, one that he told in his book *Souvenirs of Solitude*, and it was about how years ago after a difficult phone call he had, he left his home. He was distracted, and he had an appointment that day to give a talk to the inmates of Trenton State Prison.

When he stood up there in front of the inmates, he had been distracted. Like I said, right before he got up there, so without stopping to think about his surroundings, his first words of greeting to the inmates were, "Well, it's nice to see so many of you here."

When I read that statement, I tipped my head back and laughed out loud all by myself. Mainly though, I recognized how Brennan responded to his own words. He wrote, "I'm frequently not in form, on top, or in control. This is part of my poverty as a human being, and self-acceptance without self-concern simply expresses a reality."

He writes, "an impoverished spirit prevents the poor man from becoming a tyrant to himself."

Bren was not anxious, shocked, or even much concerned about this misstep in front of the inmates. Instead, he had a light heart about it. If he had been trying to be great that day, this mistake would have crushed him. Instead, he showed up solid, which meant there was room to make a mistake and to move on without crumbling.

When we try to be great, we risk becoming a tyrant to ourselves when things don't go the way we planned. One final quote, and then I'll be done, Dallas Willard writes about the often misunderstood phrase that we find in the Bible about dying to self.

He says, and this is a quote, "When we see people dominated by their lust for glory or insisting that their will be done, we will be in a position where we can be very firm and not cooperating with them even if they're our loved ones. When we live in the shepherd sufficiency and die to ourselves, we become the most firmly established people in the world."

That quote is from his book *Life Without Lack*, the most firmly established people in the world. So Class of 2020, don't try to be great. Just be solid. Be solid in the way you live in your house until the next phase begins, in the way you hang out with your family, your choice to laugh instead of roll your eyes, in the way you choose to listen to your younger siblings who will miss you more than they can possibly say or put into words.

Be solid with how you enter into your next experience. Not like a tourist who watches from behind a camera lens and insists all of your usual comforts are close at hand, and not like an expert who thinks she's supposed to know everything. As best you can, enter into your new situation, ready to be fully present and engaged when you can, and free to withdraw when it's necessary. Be solid enough to be boring. If you're trying to be great, you might not notice the people in the margins, your neighbors who are working twice as hard for half as much. If you're trying to be great, you might be tempted to bend the truth to get ahead.

So just be solid, honest, simple, and you. Be curious. Be open. Hold fast to your confidence when you are among many and when you're among few. And remember to share your vulnerability. Be slow to judge, slow to speak. Slow to anger. Be quick to listen. Quick to pray. Quick to look for the hope in dark situations. Bring your giftedness, as well as your insecurity, with you as you go. There are no kings or queens in this room. There are only people longing for love, searching for acceptance, and wanting to know they belong. Bring your story, the one you've already lived and the one you want to live. You'll be tempted to leave out the boring or embarrassing parts as you tell it. Don't you dare. Every bit of it counts.

You don't have to be the funny one, the smart one, the quiet, or the quirky one. You don't have to impress. You don't have to sparkle. You don't have to dazzle or be the best. Don't forget who you are. So don't try to be great, be solid is maybe another way of saying just be you. Let this be your next right thing you do in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 127 of *The Next Right Thing*.

I hope this simple practice of not trying to be great can be just one more 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 is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me at @emilypfreeman on Instagram or online at emilypfreeman.com.

P.S. If you want another post to listen to in this theme of graduation, check out episode 81 called Listen To This Before Graduation where I share three things to remember as you or your student that you love moves into the next stage of life after graduation.

And don't forget if you're looking for a thoughtful gift for the graduate in your life. The Next Right Thing is not only a podcast and a song on Frozen II, it's also a book. You can find a hardcover copy online or at your local bookstore if your bookstores are open now and you can always go to next right thing, book.com for direct links to find the book. And by the way, while you're there, take the quiz we've created that tells you what your decision-making style is. That's super fun.

All right, final words from that book. I keep quoting 10 1/2 Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said, and here are those words to close this out.

“There is an irony here. Of course, the less you think about being great, the more likely it is to happen, and if it doesn't, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being solid.”

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