



121: How to Discern and Decide

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 121. 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.

Well, one year ago this very week, my book, *The Next Right Thing* released into the world. Remember us this time last year, y'all? Going to concerts and having parties and eating in restaurants. Remember when we used to shake hands and high five each other and go to church? Well, this week that the book released last year was a time when none of us could have imagined what this posture of doing the next right thing would mean to us just one year later. This time last year, most of us probably didn't know the phrases like "flatten the curve," "slow the spread," or "keep your social distance."

But now these phrases and others have become part of our daily lives, and they remind us of how much has changed in the last year, particularly in the last month or so. Even though schools are closed, work routines have changed and events are canceled, one thing has remained the same. You still have decisions to make.

In fact, your need to make certain decisions may be even more pressing, more stressful, or more time-sensitive than they've ever been before. So how can we trust ourselves to make wise decisions during an uncertain time when our routines have changed, when we have 1 million children living in our house, when we feel extra anxious about the economy and the health of our families and ourselves, and when we're just generally foggy about everything? How can we discern and decide things about our future and the future seems more uncertain than ever?

I have a couple of tools I hope will help. One is this episode. The second is an online course. If you've been around a while, you may be one of the nearly 10,000 people who received my self-paced online class, *Discern and Decide* for free last year when you pre-ordered the book. And that might be a good resource for you to pull out. Again, if you did receive that, granted I won't say the words quarantine or pandemic in any of the five modules of the course, but it is a course all about how to create a rhythm of life to support soulful decision making, which could be more timely than ever.

If you don't have access to *Discern and Decide*, it's available for purchase for one more week. And then we're going to close the doors for a season. I'll link to the course in the show notes and you can read more about it. But in today's short episode, I'm going to take some of the basic principles that I share in *Discern*

and Decide to help you calm the chaos, clear the clutter, and wisely do your next right thing in love. So listen in.

Raise your hand if decision fatigue has eaten your lunch this week. And the thing is, I don't even have as many decisions to make this week as I did last week. But I'm finding smaller decisions way more, and my energy to make them is limited, and everything feels pretty foggy. You might have a house, like I mentioned, full of people or you might find yourself suddenly alone, and you don't know for how long. Both of these have their own set of challenges, questions, and heartbreak.

The Harvard Business Review put out an article last week, and the title was That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief. And man, that title alone resonated with me, but then I started reading the article. And in it, David Kessler is quoted, and he says, quote, "We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11. Things will change, and this is the point at which they changed. The laws of normalcy, the fear of economic toll, the loss of connection. This is hitting us, and we're grieving collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."

So that's what David Kessler was quoted to have said in this article and I really resonated with that. This collective grief, I get it. I feel that, I bet you do, too. And it includes all the stages of grief, although as Kessler mentions in the article, perhaps we don't experience the stages of grief and linear order, but on some level and in some way we all find ourselves experiencing various degrees of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and hopefully, eventually acceptance. No matter where we are in that cycle, we still have decisions to make, and some of those can't wait for calmer times. Whenever we have decisions to make, what we want more than anything else is peace, clarity, and a nudge in the right direction.

So how can we find that elusive clarity? Now, in our last episode, we talked about what to do when the world shuts down in response to our settling into this weird new normal, and the first step that's outlined in those 12 minutes. In that episode, I stand by and that step is number one, name the beginnings, middles, and ends. It's just a practice in getting present and naming what is true, what's new, what's continuing, what's ending. That gives you an overview of the landscape of your life. No need to apologize, explain, or analyze here just to name the beginnings, middles, the ends. If you don't name things properly, you'll get into trouble. Ronald Rolheiser says that, and I agree. That's by the way in his book called *The Holy Longing*, but this practice of naming what's beginning, what's in the middle, what's continuing and what's ending. This will get you presence and that was outlined in episode 120.

So what comes next after that? Well, if you want to discern and decide in your own life right now in a time that seems foggy, one practice that helps me a lot after naming the beginnings, middles and ends is, number two to put my decision into a sentence, just to ask myself what is the decision I'm trying to make? Put it in a sentence in question form. And pro tip: This has to either have a yes, no, or wait answer or an either or answer.

Now this might seem like a silly or unnecessary step, but please believe me when I say it's imperative. And it's imperative for several reasons. First, if you can't put your decision into a clear sentence, then

you won't be able to make a clear decision period. For example, you don't want to say something like, "Well what should we do about.....?" And then just name a bunch of stuff. And you wouldn't want to ask yourself, "Well how can I....?" and then name a whole list of things because those aren't really decisions to be made. Those are just things that you're carrying. So instead, you want to state it in terms of options like a yes or a no. Do I do this or that? Should I do this? Yes or no. The sentence will force you to hold just one decision at a time. Nothing brings on frustration and overwhelm more quickly than when you're trying to decide two, four, eight things all at once.

And then finally, another good reason why it's important to put it into a sentence is the sentence is going to help you know if it's time to decide or not. If you can't state clearly what the decision actually is, then don't try to make the decision until you can. Once you do that, you're ready to ask three simple questions.

First, how do I feel today? This is a question of the heart. Emotion and sensation are important. They aren't the only factor, but they are a factor. Refuse to excuse your emotions just because you can't explain them. Don't discount your feelings just because you can't quantify them. They might not be telling you the whole truth, but that doesn't mean they're not telling you any truth at all. Let them have a voice at the table. They may be strong or mild, but it's good to pay attention. And also consider if you can, not only how you feel right now, but how might you anticipate feeling about this decision a month, a year or five years from now? So that's one question. How do I feel today as it relates to this decision?

The second question, what do I know for sure right now?

This is a place for you to really listen to the facts, and this will come more naturally for some than others. Leave out the maybes and the assumptions. Only the certainties here, please. What do I know to be true? Stick to what you know. It could be a lot, it could be a little, but this is information gathering. It doesn't require digging, but maybe just let it stay on the surface. What do you know right now as you're sitting here? This is the low hanging fruit of information. What's my timeline? Have I made a similar decision in the past? How did it turn out? Is there a person I need to talk to to get more information? What are the facts that play today?

And then, finally, the last question. If I had to decide right now, what would I do?

This is not to gauge what your knee jerk reaction is, but to get in tune with your intuition based on how you feel and what you know for sure. What is your gut telling you? This is a risk-free way to assess desire, instinct, and your natural knowing.

Last night I was watching season six of Parks and Rec. I think it was episode two, and in it, April tells Anne that she's changed her mind about something because she had a gut feeling. And Ann responds, "So just like that boom, huge life decision made?" Well, April tells her that's how she's made all of her life decisions. Ann thinks about that, and then she asks, "April, how do you get your gut to talk to you?" And April responds, "You don't get your gut to talk to you. You just listen when it says something."

Now, I don't know if April Ludgate is the best model for making life decisions, but I do think she's onto something in this. Often we look for guidance. Somewhere out there we look for a sign, a word and encouragement, advice or conversation from someone else. Not to mention the fact that, if you're a person of faith, you want to hear from God above all else. You know that God speaks to you in various ways, through the Bible, and prayer, and often through other people who you trust. But another regular way he

speaks to us, maybe not audibly, but on a spiritual level, I mean, it's a way that many of us often dismiss. We don't trust it. And when I say we, I mean I'm including myself, and that's through the voice that comes from within. Now, this isn't the only way, but it is one way, and God keeps reminding me that he's made my heart his home, and that's often the place from where he'll make his voice heard.

As we lay out our requests before him, as we get honest about our decisions, the small ones, the big ones, the difficult ones, the disappointing ones, he will empower us to choose, and he'll empower us to choose well, even if we don't have all the information, even if we feel afraid, and even if we still have doubts in the midst of it.

You can only base your decisions on what you know. You can't base them on what you don't know. I've shared this verse before, but it's worth repeating this week. Proverb 20:27 says, "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord searching all the inward parts of the belly."

We all know what happens if you walk too fast with a candle in your hands, the flame will blink right out. You have to walk slow and block that flame from the movement of the air if you can. So that's what this practice does. As you name where you are, as you state your decision and consider your heart, your head, and your intuition, what you're doing is walking slow with the flame still lit. So ask your friend Jesus about the next step. If he lives within you, then that means he speaks even now through his word, through his people, and through your own deepest desires as you confess them in his presence.

Walk slow, listen close, and let that candle burn. If there's disappointment, feel it. If there's anger, say it. If there's anxiety, acknowledge it. There may be fear in making a decision, but it's okay to make it anyway. Accept that it won't be perfect. It may disappoint people and you might not get it right, but you're doing the best you can with what you know right now and listen, that's a lot. It counts, and you're not alone. So as you move forward this week in discerning and deciding what's best for you, your community, your family, your employees, your students, your neighbors, patients, clients and friends. We're with you as we're all continuing to do our next right thing together in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 121 of The Next Right Thing. I hope the simple practice of discernment 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 is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As I mentioned at the top of the episode, this is the one-year anniversary of the release of the next rate thing book, and of course, that's available wherever books are sold and as a way to celebrate, I'm leaving, Discern and Decide open for one more week. That's my online self-paced class that I created to help you design a rhythm of life to support soulful decision making. Because the way you make decisions is just as important as the decisions that you make. Those unmade decisions hold a lot of power and the secret to making better ones is to learn to make them in a better way, and that's what discern and decide is all about.

The class is self-paced, so you can get it now and go through it later. We'll close it up next week. Just visit [Emily P freeman.com](http://EmilyPfreeman.com) and click Class in the top navigation, or you can find the direct link in the show notes.

As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. I'll close with what's become a beloved quote by me and many next right thing listeners like you, and it's from James Bryan Smith who reminds us all:
"I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights. I live in the strong and unshakable kingdom of God. The kingdom is not in trouble and neither am I."

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