



Episode 73: Design A Rhythm of Life - Theme Life

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 73.

This is a podcast all about making decisions - whether you're chronically hesitant and tend to be a decision-avoider OR if you're someone who makes a lot of decisions on the daily and, while you may be confident in making them, the sheer volume of decisions has worn you out.

This is also a place for you if just need a little white space or a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment.

For a few minutes each week, you've come to the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

In our last episode, I talked about the importance of designing a rhythm of life. Because if we want to make better decisions, we need to learn to make decisions in a better way. And that doesn't start with the decision, it starts with the life.

Designing a rhythm of life is something anyone in any season of life can do. It's simple and life-giving and creates a beautiful and flexible framework for decision making.

If that sounds good but you don't know where to start, I've created an entire, simple online course with video training and a beautifully designed workbook. It's called Discern+Decide and since it's completely ready and self-paced, you can start today!

The best part is you can get this class for absolutely free when you pre-order a copy of my new book *The Next Right Thing* wherever books are sold.

Now the book doesn't come out until April 2 but the class is available now.

PS - If you pre-ordered the book way back when I first announced it in November, of course, that counts too! All you have to do now is just go to nextrightthingbook.com to claim your free gift from me to you.

Having a rhythm of life to depend on is always a gift, especially when you're in the midst of a busy season of life. Today's episode is all about the one thing I'm doing in my work that is saving my life this year.

Listen in.

If this is your first time listening in, I'll tell you that I have a commitment to keep these episodes short and today will be no different. Sometimes the episodes are story driven and reflective. Other times I go into super practical mode, describing a system or a process I use that supports more soulful decision making.

That's what we're doing today - so let's get practical.

It's no secret that the last year and a half has been one of the busiest of my life. If you're tired of hearing me say that, trust me I started getting on my own nerves a long time ago. It's been life-giving and I'm grateful, but just because I chose it and just because I love what I'm doing doesn't mean it's not also sometimes overwhelming. I'm sure you can relate.

One thing that has caused this year to be especially full for me is because, like many of you, my current work responsibilities don't all fall under the same umbrella. That means when I sit down to work, there are a myriad of (vastly) different tasks I could tackle.

This could apply to you too whether it's in your job you're getting paid for, volunteer work you're engaged in at your school, church, or neighborhood, or even running your household.

As I tried to manage the ever growing to do list, switching between tasks got me nowhere and having to decide again each day what to work on from an impossibly long list of options led to discouragement and even more decision fatigue.

I tried to prioritize based on importance or urgency, but that never seemed to work for me. Too many tasks felt equally important.

That's when I started using themed days for my work by dividing up my week based on different themes or categories. And that decision is saving my life.

It's a practical next right thing mindset and I want to share what this looks like for me because when I mentioned this on instagram a few months back, I received so many questions about it as well as heard from many of you who have been using theme days for a long time and can vouch for how well they work for you.

A quick note before I dive into sharing with you what this looks like for me, I use the word "theme" but many people call this "batching." While these two concepts have similar purposes, and I know many people might use those words interchangeably I actually think they're a bit different, at least in my own experience.

Batching work is, to me, what Michael Hyatt describes as "a form of time management that allows a person to maximize concentration and decrease distraction by grouping together similar tasks that require similar resources in order to streamline their completion."

Sounds good, right? Well, there's nothing wrong with that.

But that's not exactly what I'm talking about here. Because unlike batching, theme days are not about completion necessarily, they are about focus.

For example, Tuesdays are my hope*writer days. Hope*writers is the online membership site I co-founded and run with Gary Morland and Brian Dixon. I'm the director of content, so Tuesdays I prep for interviews, host a live teaching with a guest, meet with our team, and plan content for other things we might have going on: a class, a live webinar, or a conference.

If you look at my Tuesday tasks, they include admin, live video, content creation, and a team meeting. They are vastly different tasks. But the *theme* is the same: it's all for hope*writers.

I like choosing themes for my work days according to topic rather than according to task because for me, the difficulties don't come so much in switching between types of tasks, they come in switching between concepts, creative vision, and direction.

That might not make a difference to you and maybe batching and theme days sound the same to your ears which is perfectly fine. But I did want to make that distinction because for me personally, they have a slightly different posture.

Most of the time, theme days are not about completion, they are about focus.

Here's how that looks in my work and how it could look in yours.

Right now I'm able to work Monday through Friday. Every day I have to work is assigned a theme or a topic. It changes based on the work I have to complete or the season of life I'm in, but for the last year and a half, here's what that's looked like for me.

Right now my themed days are this podcast, @hopewriters, grad school, and The Next Right Thing book - one day assigned for each.

It doesn't mean I completely ignore everything else except that days' theme and it's not necessarily about finishing the task on the assigned day, it's more about choosing a focus and working until time's up. There are a few exceptions to that which I'll explain.

Take Monday, for example. Monday for me is a podcast day. That's the day I write, record, edit, and schedule these episodes for the next right thing podcast. All the work I do on Monday relates to this podcast.

Does that mean if something comes up for school that I completely ignore it? No. Things come up. Emails come in, my assistant texts me and I have to attend to something.

But what it does mean on Thursdays, I'm not worried about the podcast. I'm barely even thinking about the podcast. Because I know I have Monday to focus on that.

As I mentioned before, Tuesdays are my hope*writer days - I prep and host interviews, think through content, interact some in our private FB community, and meet with our hope*writer founder team.

Again, this does not mean other tasks are not allowed to be thought about or attended to. It does mean that on Fridays, I'm not worried about being behind in hope*writer work because I know I'll have Tuesday to focus on that.

Wednesdays are mostly for thinking through The Next Right Thing book launch, although to be honest these days I admit I do that a little every day. Wednesdays and Thursdays are also themed for Grad school work, as I have class on Thursday nights.

Fridays are often my meet-friends-for-lunch day or other kinds of appointments, as well as catch up day on some admin or email or other things I wasn't able to get to in my work.

Again, do I only do school work on one day a week? No. But that is the day I *focus* on school work. It's not about always completion, it's about focus. I do reading for school every day of the week because I have to or else I'll fall too far behind. Sometimes I write papers on Friday and I watch the lectures during lunch. So, there is some flexibility and even variety I bring in these smaller tasks into every day of the week. But the main theme for the days, remain.

A quick word about TIME.

Theme days can work no matter how much time you have to devote to your work that week.

Maybe you only have an hour every day to do your work. You can still pick a theme per day based on the time you have.

It's not about having hours and hours to work. It's about choosing a focus for the time that you have.

Since I have been talking about this over the past couple of months, one of the most often repeated questions I get about theme days is this: when do you fit in the life stuff?

To that I just will remind you — this is me sharing about my work days, this is not me giving you a complete schedule for my life. Just like if you are a teacher and you work during the day and then come home and have to wear all the hats of home life, the same is still true when you are working according to theme days. When the time is up, you move on to whatever your other life responsibilities might be that day.

And if I can guess, I would imagine that there are many different things you have to complete in a day's time. Sometimes my theme day may only last a few hours because that's all the time I have. Having a theme day doesn't require you to have the entire day - it more has to do with your mindset focus.

If you only have 45 minutes to work on a Wednesday, the former struggle for me was in decided what to actually work on. So I would waste 30 minutes just making the decision. With themed work days, the decision is pre-made.

If you get to the end of your established time frame and you haven't finished your themed tasks for the day, if it's not on a required deadline, no worries. You'll circle back around to it on your next assigned theme day.

But, Emily what if it *is* on a deadline? For example, people ask me what if I get to the end of a Monday and haven't finished the episode that is supposed to release Tuesday morning?

The answer for me? That isn't an option. Mondays are my main theme day exception. On Mondays, it's about focus and completion. When I decided to start a podcast back in 2017 I knew this was going to have to be a quick-turnaround project. If I was going to be perfectionistic about it, well I knew I shouldn't even start.

Instead, I decided that on Mondays I have to finish. It's my job and I don't have the luxury of inspiration, I just have to do the work. That's often a huge part of our job as artists, creators or really any kind of work. We have to push through even when our work may not feel as inspired as we want it to feel.

As I do my literal next right thing in my work on Mondays, it's become an act of faith for me to finish without exception. Even if it doesn't feel complete. Even if it doesn't seem ready.

I don't wait to publish these episodes until they're ready. I have to publish them when it's *time*.

Now, of course, things happen and we are interrupted and things might interfere with our scheduled plan. It's just like any other job. Again, theme days aren't a rigid, inflexible system. They are a framework by which you can predetermine your focus.

So. If you, too, have a job or a body of work that exists under multiple headings, perhaps establishing theme days in your own work will be helpful.

Here's an overview to help get you started.

1. Look at your schedule, to do lists, and weekly tasks.
2. Pick themes based on buckets or headings or categories that make sense for your own life right now.
3. Assign a day per theme. If you have too many, one thing you can consider is assigning one theme to the morning, and one to the afternoon.
4. Talk to your people — your spouse, roommate, kids, whoever lives in your house. This will affect them. Make sure they know what days you'll be doing what. Constant conversation is key. Especially if you have a job that isn't clock in, clock out, you know structure won't just appear. You have to create it. Theme days can help establish a rhythm for everyone.
5. Don't give up too soon. Keep your themes in place for at least 2 weeks, even a month, before you decide if it's not working. Tweak and change along the way, but don't give up the whole system just because it takes some adjusting.

To do your good work in this world requires that you are able to be creative. That applies whether you are a teacher, a writer, a mother, or an accountant. You need time and space to access your best work. And if you're spending that valuable time and space trying to figure out

what to focus on next, or switching between categories too much then you're wasting time that could be used diving deep into your work.

Now, I know when I first started talking about this on Instagram I got a ton of questions. If I get enough questions that weren't answered here, I'm happy to continue this conversation in another episode. We'll see what happens.

In the meantime, let's remember this together. The goal of our lives, isn't to be the most productive humans we can possibly be. The goal, the aim, is union with God and connection with each other. Our hearts beat for the kingdom, to join God in the restoration and renewal of all things. Because we are not people who believe this world will disappear and be irrelevant. We are people who believe the good, creative, life-giving work we do everyday can actually make a difference. We're not trying to change the world - Jesus already did that. Instead, we are joining him with our unique place, gifting, and personalities to bring hope and healing into the quiet, broken, chaotic, small, beautiful corners of our everyday lives.

In the words of Mike Cospers from his book, *Recapturing the Wonder*, "Your daily routine has a worldview. It orients your body to the world and primes you to experience it in specific ways . . . Each moment of our days — our meals, our conversations with friends, our escapes, obsessions, romances and distractions— is what we make of our lives. Our habits and rhythms of life are formative not only who we are but how we know the world, including whether we know it to be place where God is present or absent."

As we look to reorder our days, may we always remember the presence of God with us within them.

Thanks for listening to episode 73 of The Next Right Thing.

Our book releases on April 2 and I've already mentioned if you pre-order it, not only will it arrive the day or day after release, you will also get Discern+Decide, my brand new class that will help you design a personal and communal rhythm of life.

AND, I don't know if I've mentioned this on the podcast yet or not, but we'll send you the audiobook of *The Next Right Thing* as well - for absolutely free. So, you don't even have to read the book, I'll read it to you if you pre-order *The Next Right Thing* by April 1.

If you pre-order *The Next Right Thing* by April 1, you'll get Discern+Decide for free and I'll read the entire book to you for free. So if you've already pre-ordered or if you want to do that today, claim your free bonuses at nextrightthingbook.com and start today with designing your own rhythm of life.

In closing, I'll close with final words from writer Annie Dillard in her book, *The Writing Life*:

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.”

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