



114: Welcome Your Loneliness

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 114. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. Many of the decisions we make are second nature. I'm here for the ones that aren't.

In our last episode, episode 113: Decide to Decide, I shared how sometimes a decision stresses us out because we haven't named what the decision is in the first place. So it just lingers, unmade, beneath the surface because we haven't pulled it out to decide to decide. Those kinds of unmade decisions hold sneaky power over us because we are uncomfortable or unsettled, but we don't exactly know why. Well, in that episode, I share three things to do when that's the case for me and maybe that will help you too. But today's episode is the opposite. It's when we feel uncomfortable or unsettled, but it isn't because of an unmade decision or unidentified decision.

It's just because of the state of things. We wish there was a decision to be made, an action step to take, or a formula to follow. Instead, there's just us, unsure about what to do, who to ask, or who's in our corner. In my letter to my readers last week, I mentioned some loneliness I've been experiencing lately, and a reader wrote back and asked me to share more about that. Well, my first response in my head was a sharp, "No way!" But then my second thought was "maybe..." and the ellipsis that follows that maybe, well, that's today's episode. Welcome.

When we're feeling lonely, what's our next right thing? I can't say I really have answers to that question, but I do have words and I do have stories. And sometimes when you're feeling lonely, words and stories land better than answers do anyway. Listen in.

My husband John and I are in our 18th year of marriage, and our relationship is one of the greatest gifts of my life. That is true. What is also true is that several times over the past few months, I've heard these words come out of my mouth in conversation with other people: I've experienced more loneliness after I got married than I ever did before I got married.

Now that's not really a commentary on the state of our marriage. More it reveals that when I was 24, when we got married, I probably expected not to be lonely ever again after our wedding day. That's rookie mistake number one. And for the past two decades, I've been learning how wrong that assumption was. Now, as a white, middle class, college-educated woman who lived with supportive parents or lovely roommates up until I was married, my life experience does not necessarily scream lonely in the way I

know so many people might experience loneliness. The kind that accompanies divorce, neglect, abuse, homelessness, single parenting, the death of a spouse or parent or child. These have not been part of my personal story yet, but they might be part of yours.

Of course, we know some degree of loneliness can visit us no matter our circumstance, no matter where we live or who lives with us, and feelings of loneliness are not reserved for those who are alone. Let's just say that.

We also, I hope, know that just because you're married doesn't mean you don't experience loneliness. And just because you're single doesn't mean that you do. The experience of loneliness really is not contingent upon where we live, how much money we have, our employment or relationship status, but upon the fact that we are human. Lately, my most profound sense of loneliness has revolved around my work. So that's the angle from which I'll talk about loneliness today, but no matter where you are in your feelings of loneliness, perhaps you can still relate.

I attended my first professional conference 17 years ago when I worked for a local university as the sign language interpreter coordinator. I flew to Chicago to learn more about the craft of sign language interpreting and to meet with other interpreters from all over the country. I was also 12 weeks pregnant with the twins at that time, so one memory that stands out the most of that conference for me was feeling constantly sick and getting up early to walk to the Starbucks around the corner so I could get some orange juice with ice. But there are other things I remember about that conference, too, and one of them was the pressure and anxiety I felt to make connections, to rub shoulders, to network as they say.

P.S. Anytime I hear the word network, I picture a convoluted ball of tangled up wires with frayed edges, all searching for a spark or a connection. My brain is so weird.

I don't remember any of the people I networked with. I'm pretty sure I didn't do it right. But I do remember my roommate Stacy, who was the interpreter coordinator at a neighboring college, and who I only knew from a distance, but we decided to room together, and she brought me tea when she knew I wasn't feeling well. She was kind, and I was grateful. So, I remember Stacy and cold orange juice and anxiety in Chicago, and John's voice on the other end of the phone offering comfort and encouragement to me because I was desperately lonely that week. I was lonely for a lot of reasons, I'm sure, but mainly looking back, I know a big part of it was because I was sent there by my boss on the university's dime, and I wanted to make sure they got their money's worth.

But the problem for me was I wasn't sure how to make that happen. I wasn't sure what was expected of me. I wasn't sure how to measure my own success. I didn't feel adequate to be in the room with all these famous interpreters. Yes, you heard that right. If you don't already know this, every profession has their own celebrities. And sign language interpreting is not immune from it. In some circles, even motherhood seems to have celebrities, PTA president, anyone? Room mom, anyone? Parents with the best house for the kids to hang out in. Yeah. Every profession has celebrities. Maybe it's not celebrities like in the Hollywood Oscar's and Grammy's sense of the word, but in every business, in every work, there are those who seem to belong, who have arrived, who have made it and are doing it right. And then there's the rest of us, wondering if we have what it takes to do this work well or even at all.

And even though that was 17 years ago, and even though I'm in an entirely different profession now, writing books, hosting this podcast, co-writing a membership site for writers, even though some might say I'm a writer who has arrived or who's made it. I will say to you that while there are a lot of insecurities I have overcome after ten years of doing this work, there are a lot of hurdles that I've crossed over, and fears that I've pushed through, yes. There are many first-timer experiences that I've grown out of, but loneliness isn't one of them.

And that's where I was when I wrote my end of the month letter to my readers. I was naming some loneliness I've been experiencing in my work lately even though I have a lot of friends who do this work, even though I've been doing it for a while now, even though, I, for the most part, know where to go to get my questions answered. Still, when you have a job to do, especially when you're the one calling the shots, making the decisions, or are the manager of people in some way, there's a natural loneliness that accompanies that space. At the end of the literal day, I am the only one who can do my next right thing. I am the only one who can write my next book or make decisions about vision and next steps in my work. And you're the only one who can do that in your work, too.

As it turns out, you can't network your way out of loneliness. And maybe that's what I was trying to do at that first professional conference. Maybe I was making it too hard. Maybe I needed to look no further than my roommate and let that be enough for that particular trip. Now, it's true, networking is a corporate word, and I'm not really a corporate girl, but just because I don't like the word networking doesn't excuse me from doing my job.

Let me state it plainly. Networking is part of my job. It's part of a lot of our jobs actually. Just because we don't feel skilled at something, doesn't mean we don't have to do it. We can't change the game, but we can change how we approach it, how we talk about it, and our posture toward it.

For several summers, my editor and I, co-lead a session at a conference for writers, where we offered 12 truths to know before you write your next book. Well, writers would come up to me after that session and ask questions, questions like, how do I grow my readership? Or how do I build my platform? And people still ask me those questions now inside of Hope*Writers, my membership site for writers. And they're good, honest, fantastic questions. And when I hear those questions, I find myself wanting to offer both a hug and also wanting to fling heavy objects across the room.

It's not because I'm mad that the questions are being asked. It's just because I have a complicated relationship with networking, if you haven't figured that out yet. Here's the thing, you are a person and I am too, and we desperately need each other. We eat our kids' leftover macaroni and cheese, and we need to pluck our eyebrows on the regular, and we hold our hearts together with smile-shaped Band-aids and a handful of Oreo cookies. Pass the milk, please. I can't do this without you.

So, how does this conversation about networking connect with these feelings of loneliness? Good question. Thank you for asking. Well, simply imperfectly, I think part of it is this: when we feel lonely in our work, it can seem like the answer is to network. Find people who get what you do, who can support what you do and who you can support, too. And honestly, I'm being so for real here. I think that is part of the answer. I think that's vital actually. If you don't know people who get what you do, find them. Find them yesternow as my sister Myquillyn would say. That is your next right thing.

But what about when you do know people who get what you do and you still feel lonely? I don't think loneliness always has a straight line to an answer, and when we feel lonely, I'm not sure the goal is to get rid of the lonely feelings. So, what is the goal? And what is our next right thing then?

Somehow in times like this, I always find my way back to Matthew 11. Not the lovely verses at the end that we love so much, the "come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden." Yes, I love those verses, but I'm talking about the ones at the beginning, the part where a jailed John the Baptist questions Jesus, sending a message through his disciples asking, "Are you the expected one or shall we look for someone else?"

I tear up every time I read his question. It doesn't seem to me that John the Baptist is angry or suspicious here. As I read it, it just seems like he's feeling tired and small and lonely. How Jesus responds to John's question feels important to me. I sit up and I pay attention, and I invite you to do that, too. Because Jesus doesn't get angry or become defensive. He doesn't reprimand John here for his lack of faith. Instead, he simply tells the disciples to listen, look, and then tell John what they observe. Blind people see, lame people walk, deaf people hear, sick people are made well. And so as John's disciples walk away to report back to John, Jesus turns to the crowd and begins to talk about John. "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

Reading Jesus say that about his friend John makes me cry because after it seemed like John questioned everything Jesus was about, Jesus his friend and his God, remained unoffended and praised John's greatness.

At dinner a few nights after spending time there in Matthew 11, our youngest read a riddle with the word journey in it, and so I asked him if he knew what that word meant, and he said, "No." This was several years ago, by the way. He was much younger than he is now. But his older sister spoke up ready with a definition, and she said, it means to go on a journey. I challenged her to define the word journey without using the word in the definition. And she had a hard time coming up with a different answer.

Going to Jesus when you doubt Jesus seems like using a word in its own definition. Why would you ask someone you doubt to confirm the thing you're doubting? Shouldn't you go to a different source? Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?

If John didn't think Jesus was the one they'd been waiting for, it doesn't seem to me like he would go to Jesus to confirm it, but he does. And so here we are with our feelings and experiences of loneliness. Our hands filled with questions about where we fit and our own contribution. God promises his witness, and maybe that's a comfort or maybe that's offensive. Where is God then in my loneliness? Well, he's here, he's here with you, and he's here with me. He invites us both to be ourselves, no matter who's in the room, to trust ourselves as we walk with him. We can make friends, build trust, pray, and listen. We can absolutely actively network in ways that feel like us for the sake of our job and our responsibility and our calling. And we can be professional without being stiff. We can be influential without being preachy. We can share our stories without being self-centered. We can network without being robots.

We may also be lonely even though we're surrounded by people. And that doesn't mean something's wrong with us. I don't have a great action step for us this week. Mostly, I just want to say I think a lot more of us experience loneliness than we realize. And sometimes just knowing that helps to ease the

burden of it a little bit. So, from my house to yours, I'd tip my hat if I was wearing one and extend my heart and simply say, I know you might be feeling lonely, but you are most certainly not alone. We don't have to push that feeling away. Instead, what if our next right thing is to simply welcome it? What if we became curious about it? What if we confessed in the quiet of our cars, our kitchen, our classrooms, our cubicles? Yeah, I'm lonely. I'm also loved. Maybe our next right thing is to simply believe those two things can be true at the same time.

Father, in our loneliness, may we know that we are loved. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thanks for listening to episode 114 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this invitation to welcome your loneliness 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. If the fog of loneliness is clouding your vision today, I hope you talk with someone in your real life about it. A friend, a spouse, a family member. In my experience, a lot more of us are going through loneliness more often than we realize, and certainly more often than we talk about. You, my friend, are not the only one.

Well, as always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. And hey, if you'd like to receive that monthly letter I send out, I'll send out another one at the end of this month. You can just visit emilypfreeman.com/letter. We'll link to it in the show notes, and we'll be sure that your name is on the list to get that letter the next time around. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.