



## **I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing.**

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 170. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you 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'm having a conversation with an author whose book I'm currently reading.

But before we get into it, a reminder that it's never too late to start learning something new, which is why I want to share a few classes from this episode's sponsor Skillshare that can help you discover a new skill, a new passion, or a way to create more meaning in your everyday life. Skillshare's Online community offers thousands of classes for the creative and the curious. One particular class that caught my eye is Artivism: Create Inspiring Art for Change taught by Nikkolas Smith.

He's an artist who believes art has the power to heal and helps others use art to explore their inner worlds and impact their external surroundings. Or maybe you want to discover a better way to share your ideas with the world. In that case, you might like Presentation Essentials by Simon Sinek. Simon is well-known for his books, especially Start With Why, and he shares how to identify passions, speak with conviction, and transform nerves into natural energy in his short half-hour class.

With so much to explore, real projects to create, and the support of fellow creatives, Skillshare empowers you to accomplish real growth in areas you care about. And it's affordable too, with annual subscriptions available for less than \$10 a month. Right now, Next Right Thing listeners can get a free trial of premium membership at [skillshare.com/nextrightthing](https://www.skillshare.com/nextrightthing). Explore your unlimited trial access to classes like Nikkolas and Simon's for free just for being here with me today.

Go to [skillshare.com/nextrightthing](https://www.skillshare.com/nextrightthing) to claim your offer or tap the link in today's show notes. Now onto today's episode where I'm talking with author, counselor, and overall kind human Aundi Kolber. Her book, Try Softer, is one I've been reading slowly and I'm finding it to be such a practical companion these days, as we begin to slowly make tentative plans for the future and try to dream again. Try Softer is a fresh approach to move us out of anxiety, stress, and survival mode and into a life of connection and joy.

And let me tell you, it's been a delight to see all the ways trying softer might be our next right thing. Listen in.

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*The Next Right Thing with Emily P. Freeman*

Emily:

Aundi, I am so grateful you could join me today on The Next Right Thing Podcast. Welcome.

Aundi:

Thank you so much for having me. I've really been looking forward to this.

Emily:

Well, me too. I have to tell you, the tagline of my very first is Letting Go of the Try-Hard Life, and that book came out in 2011. And then in 2020, you come out with this brilliantly titled book, Try Softer. And I'm like, man, I wish I would have thought of that. I love it so much, and I just want to start out right here at the top. Trying softer is a counterintuitive, counter-cultural posture. And in the book, you teach us how God specifically designed our bodies and minds to work together to process our stories and work through obstacles.

And I would love it if you could talk a little bit more about the role of our bodies in the work of processing our stories.

Aundi:

I didn't realize that was... I wanted to say, I didn't realize that was the tagline of your first book and that's so beautiful. I think I have for a long time just really been drawn to your work. I think because there's a similar ethos to... I'm also an Enneagram four, so I'm sure that has something to do with it. But yeah, just this journey for me, really it's been learning in my own life to embody what it means to try softer. I think so often the best work comes out of our lived experience of really learning something so we can truly offer it to others.

Because I think without that, it's just a good idea. With your question of what does that mean that God's designed our body to do this work, and I'll say this from the top, there's a lot to it, but I can give some bird's eye view of what I think that means. The big idea, which for me is a beautiful integration with faith, is that our bodies are designed to heal and to process information. And what that means, I think sometimes I use the analogy in the same way that if you get a paper cut, your body heals.

There are natural elements, components, and dynamics of our body that allow us to heal. What's so interesting is that it's also true emotionally and physically. One of the things that's fascinating about emotions is that they start as sensations in our bodies. As we name them, as we become aware and are able to work with them and articulate what's going on with them, that's really when they become feelings and we're able to work with them differently. A lot of that understanding has come from my work being trained as a trauma therapist.

I use a modality called EMDR, which stands for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. And that type of modality is based on this idea that our body, when we have the support and resources and safety, we are able to move emotions, sensations, and even disturbances and trauma through our nervous system so that it can fully integrate. Something that may be or have been or has the potential to be traumatic or difficult will not be that when we have that proper support. I think going back to that original question, so much of my work is really based on wholeness.

It's based on what we're made for. We live in a world that has a lot of pain, a lot of trauma, a lot of brokenness. I think 2020, and even into 2021, has highlighted the extent to which there is so much pain. This work of learning to be with ourselves. I use the phrase compassionate attention simultaneously with try softer because I really believe that's the invitation that God offers us, that God's posture to us is compassionate. And we are invited to steward that same compassionate attention toward ourselves.

And that really is what facilitates a lot of the process that I'm speaking about.

Emily:

When I listen to you talk, Aundi, it's almost like you're inviting us to mother and father ourselves, almost like a parent would do to a small child. And I hesitate almost saying that because sometimes when we use parental language to describe God, for many people, that is not a welcome image.

I think it's helpful to just name that out, which I appreciate what you said about naming, but to name that out and to say that what you're talking about there's so much paternal-maternal energy that I think we have either been malformed in our or around us and so can sometimes resist that. But the other day, it's funny, I had a personal retreat. I'll use this as a little story. I went on a personal retreat.

And because of COVID, normally the place where I go, we can eat together with everyone and there's this lovely woman who makes the food and serves it. But because of COVID, we had to go get our trays and then take them back to our rooms. It was very personal, the retreat, but I had been praying that morning about just kind of grieving the fact that I wanted to understand God both as father and as mother. And that's a whole thing that we could have a whole long conversation about, but I won't get into it.

But essentially I was sort of wishing I understood God more in this full picture way. And I went to lunch and I stood in line and I got my tray, and there was a there was a woman and a man serving lunch. The woman is the one who cooked it, and she kind of served our tray because of the whole restrictions. And then she said, "And then he'll..." I don't remember his name. "Mike will get the drinks." I got a water and he asked if I wanted lemon.

And I said yes. This is a very detailed story. He put the lemon in my water, like in the most gentle kind, careful way. And as I walked back to my room I thought, God just mothered me through a man, through a man putting lemon in my water. I thought, the way that we often insist upon or see feminine masculine, all of these things, it's not broad enough.

And I think sometimes the same can be said for gentleness and receiving love and mothering and fathering from God and also doing that for ourselves. All of that to say, that was my long story to say, I love what you say about the power of naming and kind of recognizing what it is that we need versus what it is we think we need. Here on the podcast, I talk a lot about helping people move through decision fatigue and chronic hesitation.

I'm curious if you could maybe name or just talk through some of the stories or narratives that we tell ourselves that could make decision-making difficult.

Aundi:

First, I just want to say, I love that whole conversation about the parenting elements of God. And in that vein of naming, if folks are listening and there's wounds around that, just really want to honor that. I am a survivor of complex trauma from my childhood. I call it re-parenting. I didn't come up with that phrase, but it's a phrase I use often. I'm not going to go all the way down that road, because we could go so far down.

We could just do so far. So far, but there's just so much to honor there. And just to know that wherever you are, however you receive that, what Emily was just saying, is valid and that you can really start there. In a sense, that's what try softer is, is that it's to say, with compassionate attention, I honor the reality of exactly where I am knowing that God meets us right there. We don't have to hustle into it. We don't have to push or fight to make it make sense. God just meets us there. As a caveat and a side note, I wanted to say that.

But with what you're saying, I think that's a great integration of these two different ideas. One of the things that's really fascinating... I geek out sometimes around our nervous system and how our bodies are designed, because it is so cool, it is literally like a whole universe. Each of us are like a universe that we carry around in our bodies, and I just think that's amazing. One thing that it made me think of as you were talking about this is that... There's a therapist. Her name is Deb Dana, and she does a lot of work with what's called Polyvagal Theory.

And Polyvagal Theory helps us understand how our body unconsciously, subconsciously moves into different nervous system states based off of something called neuroception. Neuroception is this really cool thing that our body does. It's sort of like spidey sense, where without even a conscious thought, our body begins to adapt to the information right in front of us. What's significant about this is that in your conscious mind, you may be thinking, here's what I'm going to get done today. Here's my list. Here's what I'd like to happen.

But your body, perhaps, especially for folks who've experienced trauma, but this is true of every single person, your body is going to pick up on the cues of safety in your immediate environment and in your relationships. For example, I'm a highly sensitive person, so I got a lot of fun things, dynamics that come up for me. But like if a room, for example, is super messy, my body, partly my neuroception, picks up a sense of some chaos. In my conscious mind, I might be thinking like, "I want to do this, and I want to do this," but the chaos can...

That can be a difficult thing for my body to digest, because I can begin to move to a place of hyperarousal where I start to get anxious or overwhelmed. The intersection here with what you're seeing is that oftentimes, Deb Dana says, story follows state. Here's what that means is that you start your day, you've got a couple of decisions you need to make, but your body maybe is perceiving a bunch of information that you're not consciously registering.

Maybe it's a super messy house, or maybe it's the anxiety of your children, or maybe it's the anxiety of our culture and our world, and you're trying to hold all of that, while also making some significant decisions. Story follows state means that if your body is beginning to move into hyperarousal, so that's like a fight, flight, or fawn response, or if your body gets too overwhelmed, you'll actually move into or

freeze, and that can sometimes look like numbness, depression. In really severe situations, you can even lose consciousness.

As those things intensify, if you move into a freeze response when you're trying to make a huge decision, the story that you almost inevitably will tell yourself is that this is too big for me to decide on, or maybe I'm not capable of it, or maybe I don't have what I need to do it. There's lots of stories that get informed by the nervous system state. One of the things that's really cool about sort of a trauma informed perspective is that we can have compassion, first of all, for why our body does that. It's actually brilliant.

Our body does that to do its best in service of our safety. And as we move, as we unwind and come back into a place of what is sometimes called the window of tolerance. In other theories, it's called ventral vagal. We could go all into. Sometimes you might just think of it as feeling like yourself or your true self, or sometimes I call it my adult self. Usually you have a sense of like, "I'm capable. I can do this. I have resources. I have people who care about me. God is with me. I am not alone." There are a lot of stories that tend to be the truest stories that come out of that.

As we can learn to have compassion for whatever state we're in, we can move back into that sort of true self, ventral vagal, window of tolerance place. And I think that's the place from which we have the access to the most wisdom and typically we're able to make the best decisions.

Emily:

Your words and work about the window of tolerance have been so helpful for me in Try Softer. And one reason is because all those things that you just said and named so beautifully, I think many of us, not everyone, but maybe a lot of people, rather than naming it as, oh, I am now exiting my window of tolerance. I am now recognizing that there's chaos, and it's going to inform my decisions and my body is reacting to it.

Aundi:

No. Instead, we just automatically go to this place of shame. I should be able to handle this. What is wrong with me? The question, what is wrong with me, I think that comes up a lot. When we feel stuck in decision-making... I talk about decision-making, but that's the most surface thing, right? That is evidence. That's my front, spoiler alert. We're really talking about formation beneath the surface and decision-making is just you're in.

You all are here, but we're talking about spiritual formation really all the time here, but I do think decision-making is such an arrow or a doorway into how we're being formed. We're all being formed every day. We all get a spiritual formation. Dallas Willard says, but the question is what kind. And I think that what you're talking about and what is so I think brilliant and beautiful about what you're sharing is there are reasons why. It's not that something's wrong with you.

It's actually something's right with you and your body is doing exactly what your body is made to do, and it's this brilliant universe, but maybe it can be a hint to something that needs to be tended to or mended or made well. I'm grateful for and want to see if you have any more words to say about that shame piece that can come up a lot of times in connection with how our bodies respond to things.

Shame is such a big piece of so much of this work. I think of shame as often one of the dynamics that keeps us in patterns that at one point maybe protected us, but now are keeping us from really living. I think there's a lot of different dynamics, but one thing I will speak to is... And this is a different take on shame than a lot of us here, but I will just name it here. That for many of us, shame is something we learned to internalize at some point in our lives because it allowed us to belong.

Now, I know that sounds really weird, but the idea is that let's say I'm a kiddo. Every time I had a big feeling, my parents were like, "What are you doing? You're such a problem. We don't have time for you. You're too much." Right? So you learn like, oh my gosh, my feelings are not okay. They are too much for everybody, especially the people who love me or are trying to love me the most.

What can happen is we learn, we internalize that, and we say, "I don't want my parents to shame me or whoever," I'm just using this as an example, "so I will shame myself. I learn if I shame myself, if I keep myself in this box of who I think I'm supposed to be, then I can still belong." And maybe this belonging is a very limited, a very even dark, not what we're really made for, but we are literally wired for connection. As humans and especially as kiddos and we're growing up and our brains are formed, we'll do just anything to belong.

I share that piece because I think that can come in many forms. It can come from our culture. It can come from our systems. It can come from our schools, our churches. We learn, this is who I have to be to belong, to matter, to be significant. I will cut off any part of myself I need to and divorce myself from that part of myself so I can still at least have this limited belonging. And I think the invitation to wholeness and healing is to reclaim, is to say, "At one point, I needed that." As a kiddo and you literally need your caregivers.

So of course, of course, you did whatever you could to survive that situation. I think as we heal, as we find new resources and support and sink into the invitation of God's actual love for us, we have more ability to say, "Shame, I see how you have tried to serve me paradoxically, but this is not the true story anymore. This is no longer... Today, I am a 38 year old woman with resources and support and I am beloved. Thank you for your service. I get where you were coming from, but that's not the true story for me anymore."

And then that allows me to come home to myself and to really have... It's not that I want to live from that place in my shame, but I see where it came from, and I maybe even see how it in some ways oddly protected me. But gosh, it feels good when we can take it off.

Emily:

I have an episode and a chapter title called Coming Home to Yourself or Come Home to Myself, and we'll link that to the show notes. That's a lovely segue into my next question for you, Aundi, which is that I get emails, messages, DMs, all the things, from listeners all the time asking about one particular decision or another. And I also get emails from people who say, "You helped me make this decision about quitting my job or f moving to another state or healing a relationship."

And it's funny because I'm like, I really didn't give any specific advice about those things, but hopefully the practices and the principles can be applied in lots of different ways. But a lot, and I'm telling you a lot of the angst with these decisions comes down most of the time, not all, but most of the time, especially among women, to a hesitancy to trust ourselves. It's like we are looking for someone outside of us to tell us it's okay to listen to our own intuition, listen to what we really want to do.

What you're saying about shame is so internalized I think in some ways that we have been taught or conditioned or whatever the thing is to not trust that kind of... Where our spirit is connected with God's spirit or our grown-up self or whatever you want to call it. I'm curious with the practice of trying softer and just kind of getting real practical about decision-making, daily decision making, whether that be small things or whether that be larger things.

So often in my experience, both my own experience and in listening to so many listeners and readers over the years, is we often know exactly what to do, but it just takes us... The reason why decisions take so long is because we need that much time to trust ourselves to do the thing. Can try softer... Tell us, Aundi, how can trying softer kind of play in to this process of decision-making and maybe learning to trust ourselves sooner?

Aundi:

Yeah, I love how you're bringing together and bridging how all this stuff connects, and I totally agree. Decision-making really is a function of our nervous system. I mean, it's not the only piece certainly, but it's highly, highly connected. What I would just say is that because I'm talking about this so broadly, I'm going to bring in some nuance here. I often say that this isn't a one size fits all. I'm like the anti-quick fix, checklist type person for so many reasons.

And yet, I think there are really practical things that we can do in our lives to help us have access sooner to that sort of adult self, ventral vagal, window of tolerance energy. I mean, even just if this is helpful for folks to hear, one of the reasons why that is different than other nervous system states is because our whole brain is integrated.

And what this means is that you have access to your whole self when you are in this place, meaning every thing that you have learned, overcome, every person that, as Mr. Rogers says, has loved you into existence, all these things, that's available to you. That's the first thing I just want to name is that you are this galaxy, you're this universe of experiences. This constellation of all these things, that's available to you there. It's not available to you when we go into fight or flight, or when we go into freeze.

In fact, our brain is really coming from survival mode, so we have very limited access to our resources essentially. The question then is, so what does it look like to help us come back to that place, or to stay there longer, or to solidify the neural pathways that keep us there? There's a few things that I would say. I think a couple months ago, Emily, I think you might've done a series on... I don't know if it was on grounding or just on senses. I forget.

Emily:

The five senses.

Aundi:

The five senses. Okay. So if folks were following along with that, that's great prep. Because one of the most basic things that I teach folks, but honestly I still use if I find myself getting really activated and it's just so helpful, is something called grounding. The five senses are a key way to... It's a way into grounding. And what I mean by grounding really is that we are coming back to the five senses and we're able to sort of become really present to this exact moment, because typically our exact moment is safe.

Now, obviously, if you're not safe, we need to adjust that and do everything we can to get into safety. But if this exact moment is safe and we can help our body come to know that fully and fully integrated, we then again have access to all our resources. One of the ways that I personally and I really encourage folks to utilize for grounding is to get outside, if at all possible. The more activated you are, the more overwhelmed you are, if it's possible, go outside and put your feet in the grass and notice, what is the sensation on your feet?

What are you smelling? What are you hearing it? Is there anything that you can taste? Can you pick up a rock and notice the weight of the rock and really observe what it feels like? And I know maybe for folks who might be hearing this, they're like, "Wow, that sounds a little funky," but I just want to say it's worth a try, because what we're trying to do is it's almost like we're getting really small. We're getting really particular, and we're getting to that place so our body is trying to regain safety. Here's what I'll say too.

The more activated you are, the more you may need to allow your body to become regrounded. In general, that's something I teach every single person and I highly recommend using those things. But I think as we then learn some of those practices, there are a few other... Well, there are several things that you could do. But one thing that I really love is utilizing something called self-compassion. And this phrase was first coined by Dr. Kristin Neff. Self-compassion is really the practice...

There's three elements that she brings up and that's mindfulness, understanding that we're not alone, like we're not the only one who's suffered, and self-kindness. This is the triad of what makes self-compassion. And while there's lots of different ways into self-compassion, a really simple one that I use with folks and myself personally is if I'm having a hard time accessing self-compassion, I think of someone that I love, and I think about them in pain, and then I think about how I feel towards them in pain.

For me, a lot of times I think of my kiddos and just how much I love them. I want to help them through that pain. And then I say, I wonder if I could shift that to myself. Can I observe myself in pain? And can I offer that compassion of like, wow, you're having a really hard time making that decision, Aundi. But then I can recognize, well, that makes sense. You're doing this and you're trying to parent kids, and you're homeschooling and you're trying to write a book. There's all these things going on. Oh, it makes sense that that's hard.

Self-compassion is beautiful for so many different reasons, but one of them is that it turns on the mammalian caregiving system, and that inhibits the cortisol that comes up in our body when we're overwhelmed or angry or frustrated or even if we're in freeze, and it allows us to come back to ourselves. I just share both of those practices as... I trust that your listeners also have what they need, that they have wisdom embedded in their body about their life. They have access to God. But what we sometimes need is a roadmap back home to ourselves.

We need a tether. We need something that will allow us to remember who we really are and what we really know and what we really care about. I think as we practice those emotional regulation strategies, I think of it like wisdom rises. It's so strange, but I've experienced it and seen it in so many people. As we come home to ourselves, what we know becomes more clear, and I think what a great place to make decisions from.

Emily:

Aundi, you write, "Trying softer is sacred work. And while it won't be perfect or easy, it will be worth

it. Because this is what we were made for: a living, breathing, moving, feeling, connected, beautifully incarnational life.” As we close, I want to ask you, Ms. Aundi, what is your next right thing?

Aundi:

I love that. My next right thing today is to celebrate my birthday.

Emily:

Yay! Happy birthday.

Aundi:

Thank you so much. Yeah, today is my birthday. For me, birthdays can sometimes be a little complicated, because I grew up with a lot of trauma. And I think it’s almost like this is a chance of... This is what it looks like for me to reclaim and even reparent some parts of my story. Today, my next right thing is to really honor that, to honor all the versions of myself who have been with me to get to this age that I am today. It’s a special day.

Emily:

Well, we are so grateful that you chose to spend your special day with us. Thank you so much for this lovely conversation.

Aundi:

Absolutely. My pleasure.

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Thanks for listening to episode 170 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of trying softer will be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it’s true this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can always find a transcript of this and every episode. You can find Aundi at aundikolber.com.

And if you want even more help with the practice of being kind to yourself, outside of her book, *Try Softer*, she also has a free download available for us at aundikolber.com/selfcompassion. We’ll pop a link in the show notes, but that’s aundikolber.com/selfcompassion. She’ll share three practices to keep in mind if you need help trying softer. In closing, here are a few words from Aundi’s book *Try Softer*. Ways to talk to your inner child. She says, “Say I’m listening. I’ll set whatever boundaries are needed to help you feel safe.

You’re not alone anymore. I believe you. It’s over now. Let’s figure out a new way to be.’ Thanks for listening, and I’ll see you next time.