



Episode 51: Choose a Pastime

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 51.

Out of the thousands of decisions you make every day, chances are a few of them threaten to keep you up at night. If you're in a season of transition, waiting, general fogginess or if you feel overwhelmed with decision fatigue, well you're in the right place.

When faced with a frantic school year, a pressing deadline, or any other number of things that occupy the full schedule of grown ups, it's tempting to spend every moment engaged in activities that will move the needle forward. But what if embracing a pastime is more important to our working life than we realize?

Listen in.

On the morning of February 6, 1952, King George VI was found unresponsive in his bed at Sandringham House. In the midst of a battle with lung cancer, he died in his sleep as the result of a blood clot in an artery. He was 56 years old. The next day, on the evening of February 7, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill offered a public tribute to the King broadcast on BBC stations around the world. He described the King's final day in this way,

"In the end, death came as a friend, and after a happy day of sunshine and sport, after a "goodnight" to those who loved him best, he fell asleep as every man or woman who

strives to fear God and nothing else in the world may hope to do.”

What a beautiful description of the last moments of this beloved king. This speech was depicted on Episode 2 of the first season of the Netflix series, *The Crown*.

I saw the episode when it first came out and then again a few weeks ago. Even though I had seen it once and even though it was merely an actor’s depiction of the real thing, I still got chills watching Jon Lithgow, the actor who played him, read the words this real man spoke over 65 years ago.

Churchill was a leader lauded as one of the greatest orators of the time, credited with rallying the British people during World War II and leading his country to victory. As one biography describes, his “ability to inspire, his gift for leadership, and his powers of oratory played a major role in the defeat of fascism, the liberation of Europe and his warnings about the consequences of the Iron Curtain falling across the continent were prophetic.” It goes on to say that “without Churchill’s life, our world would be unrecognizable.”

Our culture takes great effort to celebrate and point to the success of great leaders by virtue of their accomplishments, their talent, and their bravery. But what we fail to point out and often don’t even realize, is what keeps the public leader encouraged and motivated in his private life. Winston Churchill’s exceptional public responsibility was balanced out by his private ability to engage in a simple pastime.

If that sounds over-stated, know that I’m simply telling you what he has said himself.

This summer while we were in London, we popped into Hatchard’s with only a few minutes to browse the city’s oldest bookshop. Up the stairs and to the left, I found myself on the floor alone and after peeking out that upstairs window to get a view of the street below, a tiny book caught my eye on an end table called “*Painting as a Pastime*” the author, Winston Churchill. Interested, I picked it up and read the inside flap that explained how Churchill didn’t pick up a paintbrush until he was 40 years old, but this pastime became for him a respite, a world “away from the private pressures of the public persona.”

I went on to read that in the end, he created over 500 pictures and this was enough to convince me to buy that book. What did painting do for this high capacity world leader? What wisdom would he offer

the world about embracing a pastime as a novice painter? What provoked him to say these simple words “Happy are the painters, for they shall not be lonely.” Could seriously engaging a pastime not only bring joy and rest but also play an essential role in our productivity and overall quality of life?

After reading this little essay made into a book, my answer to that final question is a resounding yes. If you are feeling overwhelmed, carrying a heavy decision, or living with what seems to be a growing imbalance between the work you do during the week and the rest you’re supposed to be doing on the weekends, choosing a pastime could be a worthy next right thing.

Last spring, after a particularly overwhelming work week, having exhausted every single mental capacity I had, my friend, neighbor, and lazy genius Kendra picked me up from the house, we grabbed a coffee and drove around town for an hour while I told her all my woes and wherefores. We do this every now when we don’t want to be around people in a coffee shop but we still want to hang out. Sensing my exhaustion, she wisely avoided advice or reprimand. Instead, she asked how long it’s been since I did any cross stitching.

Months I told her. It had been months.

Kendra didn’t ask me about cross stitching because I’m any good at it or because the outcome is particularly important or impressive. Let me make one thing clear, I do not do this well. I’ve done a total of two and a half hoops, one a butterfly on a leaf that vaguely resembles something that comes from nature and the other one a fern leaf that miraculously actually looks like a leaf. It’s about two inches tall, done all wrong, and it took me forever. But I’m not trying to win an award or become a seamstress. I’m just trying to find ways to be a person.

In the middle of a conversation where I shared how deeply overwhelmed I was in my work, Kendra asked me how long it had been since I cross stitched because she remembers how we talked about the act of engaging my hands in something as simple as weaving thread through fabric has moved me from a place of frantic overwhelm to a more still place of calm reason.

Here are three tips, from Winston Churchill himself, on how to engage in a pastime or a hobby, but since he used the word pastime, that’s what we’ll use. Because if you have a big decision to make that

you've been weighing, considering, and walking all around, the wisest thing to do may not be to make another list or have another conversation about the it. Instead, perhaps your best next right thing is to engage your mind in something altogether different.

Churchill says, "Broadly speaking, human beings may be divided into three classes: those who are toiled to death, those who are worried to death, and those who are bored to death."

No matter which group you most closely relate with here, they all have one thing in common - *death*. Let's uncover our human capacity to choose life even in the midst of toil, worry, and boredom.

When choosing a hobby or pastime, three simple principles are important to remember according to Churchill:

1. Different from your normal kind of work.

It may not be wise for a manual laborer to engage in a football game on the weekend. It's too close to the same kind of work. Many would say reading is their favorite pastime but, for many of us, reading is also closely connected with the same kind of work we do every day.

"To restore psychic equilibrium," Churchill says, "we should call into use those parts of the mind which direct both eye and hand." For him, this was painting and he goes on to say this: "Painting came to my rescue in a most trying time." This was most certainly different from his normal kind of work, it requested access to a different part of his brain than what was typical.

I wonder what kind of pastime you enjoy that engages a different part of your brain than your normal work. A lot of my work, for example, uses my laptop, so I wouldn't choose anything that has to do with a computer as a worthy pastime. It's too similar to my normal kind of work. The same could be true for you.

2. Engage your brain.

What is the difference between stitching fabric and watching a Netflix show? There is a time and place for both, to be sure. But the difference between them is not so much while I do them, it's after. When I get up after watching Netflix, I feel lethargic and sometimes discouraged and tired. But after creating something with my hands a page in a photo album, a pizza crust made from scratch, or my small cross stitch hoop, the feeling afterwards is a gentle fatigue from thinking through a new thing, solving a simple problem, or figuring out how to somehow re-create the original thing I see the light in the garden, the pizza in the picture, the pattern on the page recreating one of those through the work in my actual hands.

It's just enough of a challenge to keep my brain engaged but not so much as to tire me out. A restorative pastime is one that offers your brain a different kind of challenge, but a challenge just the same.

As a girl, I felt that way about writing. My dad's typewriter in our Iowa basement was my closest friend. I couldn't wait to get home after school or church and go down there and create a different world.

I couldn't believe my luck, to the point of sometimes feeling like I must be doing something wrong. This should not be allowed! What do you mean we can just make up stories? I can have this character walk through a wall if I want, this one can fly, this one never grows old. There's no rules!

Now, if I wanted to create a novel that made sense, I don't know if all of that would be true. But at the time I was playing with language and story and a narrative arc it was all exciting. It was a worthy pastime for me to engage in. Now, because I write for a living, I've lost some of the joy that comes from engaging in writing as a pastime, but it's on my list to find again.

If you are a person who operates at a high capacity in your work life, it could be difficult for you to heed this third and final piece of advice:

3. Embrace audacity, not ambition.

When Churchill talks about painting, he said he doesn't presume to explain how to paint, only how to get enjoyment. He offers a solemn warning against ambition, advising that really all we need is the audacity to try. We're not trying to make this pastime our vocation. We don't need to have the time to

perfect the endeavor. Instead, we simply need the audacity to show up and give it a go. In this little book I've been referencing, *Painting as A Pastime*, he tells a story of getting his first supplies of canvas and oil paints when he was forty years old., but when he sat down to work, the white canvas sat in front of him as an intimidating challenge. He writes, "Very gingerly I mixed a little blue paint on the pallet with a very small brush, and then with infinite precaution made a mark about as big as a bean upon the affronted snow-white shield." Talk about hesitation.

At that moment, a car drove up carrying the wife of a skilled painter of that time. She was delighted to see him painting and in that moment asked him what he was hesitating about. She grabbed the biggest brush and in what he calls a "frantic flourish," she drew fierce strokes and covered the canvas with paint.

In that moment, Churchill says "anyone could see that it could not hit back. This canvas grinned in helplessness before me. The spell was broken. I have never felt any awe of a canvas since."

When it comes to engaging a pastime, it's important to keep things in their place. Never allow the thing to be the boss of you. Put ambition in a drawer, grab the biggest brush, and embrace audacity with gusto.

In a world where we never get a break from making decisions, it's good to remember to engage in a pastime on purpose even if it feels counter intuitive to productivity.

When it comes to our spiritual life, Dallas Willard offered similar advice in his book, *Hearing God*. He says when he is seeking the voice of God or looking for an answer, he will pray, asking God simply and plainly his questions, and then he will get up and go about his day as normal generally doing something physical like gardening. And then, as he engages in regular day activities, he sets the worry aside. He says "I've learned not to worry about whether or not this is going to work. I know it does not have to work, but I am sure that it will work if God has something he really wants me to know or do. This is ultimately because I am sure of how great and good He is."

As you take a moment to look at your own life, how would you describe your pace?

Are you over-working? Over-worrying? Or overly bored with the way things are?

Could it be possible that a simple pastime just may be the key to taking yourself less seriously?
Is there an activity you used to engage in that you've lost somewhere along the way?

Is there one you've always been curious about but lacked the audacity to try?

Refuse to allow this challenge to be one more thing on your list, rather let it be a kind invitation from God to choose the kind of life found in the simple things, to engage in an act of co-creation.

May you learn to rest well so that you can work hard as you continue to simply do the next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 51 of The Next Right Thing.

If you'd like to connect beyond the podcast, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or at emilypfreeman.com

Again, this episode is inspired by Winston Churchill's essay, *Painting as a Pastime* made into a little book. I'll leave you with a final quote from the man himself, and though he speaks of painting, I found it can apply to so many things we mean to try but never get around to. Let his words encourage you as you begin to explore or re-engage your pastimes:

“The vistas of possibility are limited only by the shortness of life. Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb. Try it, then, before it is too late and before you mock at me. Try it while there is time to uncover the preliminary difficulties. Plant a garden in which you can sit when digging days are done. It may be only a small garden, but you will see it grow. Year by year it will bloom and ripen. Year by year it will be better cultivated. The weeds will be cast out. The fruit trees will be pruned and trained. The flowers will bloom in more beautiful combinations. There will be sunshine there even in the winter-time, and cool shade, and the play of shadow on the pathway in the shining days of June.”

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