



## **82: Find the Beginning in the Ending**

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 82.

This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast 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.

If you haven't subscribed to the podcast yet, do your future self a favor and hit that subscribe button in your favorite podcast listening app so that when each episode releases, it will magically appear in your podcast feed. And if you like what you hear but haven't left a review yet in Apple Podcasts, that would be so helpful. So many of you have left reviews or ratings already, like SCwifeandmama who said, "I recently came across this podcast and then purchased the book too. I am encouraged and inspired to lean forward a little more and more often to see how God has crafted and designed me and others too. I am reminded to seek the kingdom." Then in the PS, my favorite part, she confesses "This is the first time she's ever left a review for a podcast". Thank you so much for taking the time to do that! If you're listening and like what you hear, we only need 21 more ratings and reviews and we'll hit that 2,000 mark.

Now on to today's episode where I'm talking all about the importance of ending in order to find that new beginning.

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Well, I just returned from my final week of grad school and if you follow me on Instagram you may already know this week of school ended with a graduation ceremony. I hope you're not sick of me talking about grad school yet, because today, I'm going to talk about it some more.

After two years, I've finally earned my Masters in Christian Spiritual Formation and Leadership. Well, almost because what my fellow students and I all lamented as we stood in our caps and gowns together before the ceremony as though we were being hooded that day, our assignments weren't completely over. We still have two papers due before the end of the month. Talk about pomp and circumstance. More like womp and circumstance.

(Sorry, I couldn't help myself.)

After the ceremony, some of us went out for burgers and ice cream as the Lord intended, and then I made my way back to my room to figure out how to pack a mortarboard cap into my suitcase and the next day, John and I flew back to life and to business as usual.

But, I carried a little secret with me and I'm almost embarrassed to admit it to you and that is after two years of assignments, tons of reading, endless papers, and four-week-long residencies, I should be relieved that it's almost over and frustrated about those two final papers hanging over my head but the truth I'm going to tell you right now is I'm secretly glad I still have these papers left to write. I know it's so weird and I quite possibly might have a strange addiction to learning, but once those papers are turned in, then this experience really is over. And while that is the point, it's also a little sad.

Maybe you're facing down an ending today and that ending has a few loose ends left to tie up. Are you a little hesitant to move forward too? Are you dragging your feet to the finish line, concerned about what might come after? Or maybe you've already ended a thing but it went by without acknowledgment and now, you find yourself a little bit stuck with what to do next.

Today I'll offer 3 simple things to consider as you discern your next right thing.

**First, consider if it's time to put a period on the experience.**

Marking the ending of things is embedded into our culture. The parties, finales, celebrations, and farewells are all part of our regular rhythm of life. Even our birthdays technically celebrate an ending. When a baby turns 1, we mark the *end* of her first year, not the beginning of it.

When an ending is communal, involving families or groups, the likelihood of us marking it might be greater simply because more people are involved. But just because the group marks a thing doesn't mean you owned that ending for yourself. Not to mention, that if an ending is more personal or quiet, it might be even easier to overlook.

It's important to not rush through the ending, but we still have to have one. One way to do that is to find a period to end things as best we can.

On the last day of school last week, one of our teachers James Bryan Smith gave a short lecture about the ending of our time together. I really appreciated his intentionality to say *This is over and it cannot be duplicated*. That's helpful for those who may tend to expect things to carry on as they have been when in fact, circumstances have changed and so must our expectations.

We've all been to events done well and events done not so well. For example, at a wedding we love it when the pastor pronounces the couple husband and wife, the bride is kissed, the couple is announced as Mr. and Mrs. for the very first time, the crowd cheers, and the music starts right on time while the bride and groom rush down the aisle together.

What we don't love at weddings is when the pastor pronounces the couple husband and wife, the bride is kissed, the couple is announced for the very first time, the crowd cheers and then the music doesn't start right away. The couple doesn't want to walk awkwardly down the aisle in silence, so they look around and wait, and then everyone is quiet and then when the music does finally start it's too quiet but they go down anyway. It's a whole thing and it's the worst.

In a small way and for the sake of this illustration, the music is the period the ceremony needs. When every part falls into place, when the crescendo comes at the right moment and the rhythm fits the expectation and everyone plays their part, there's a sense of completion, of joy, and a settled satisfaction.

Maybe one reason you've not been able to move forward into your next right thing is because there's an ending lingering in your life that never ended with a period. Maybe it's even been years. So instead, you just kept on going without acknowledging the thing was even over at all.

Maybe it ended abruptly and there was no time to recognize it, much less grieve it.

Perhaps it ended badly and it was too painful to look at so instead you chose not to. Or maybe it's simply that life got busy. Yes, you met that goal, reached that finish line, or achieved that accomplishment, but there was dinner to make and errands to run and you never had a chance to mark the moment.

All of these things could be reasons why we are having trouble of moving on to the next right thing. We've been unwilling, unable, or maybe simply unaware that we needed to put a period on an ending.

**Another thing to consider as we move through our ending is don't let the stuff outweigh the sacred.**

In high school, my best friend Heather and I started to hang out with two guys who were also best friends. When she and one of the guys started to date, it only made sense the other guy and I hung out a lot more and started to date as well. (I put "only made sense" in air quotes because it was high school so you know, the things that make sense in high school might not make sense when we are grownups, but have mercy.) Eventually, we all went to prom together and for a few months we had the best time laughing, going to soccer and baseball games, and hanging out at each other's houses.

For a while the four of us were inseparable. But our days were numbered together and we knew it because that summer, one of the guys had to move away. Let me tell you, I held on to notes, photo albums, journal entries, and other memorabilia from that fun spring and that was my way of trying to hang on to the experience. But those things were *not* the experience, they were the evidence that the experience was real. In other words, they were the stuff.

But, I was young and my brain wasn't fully developed so I focused only on the loss and the memories lived mainly in the stuff that I couldn't bear to get rid of.

There's nothing wrong with keeping the stuff, but I didn't yet understand the importance of letting the stuff lead me to the sacred — specifically how my experience with my friends changed me, how it formed me, and what I was grateful for as a result. So I kept the stuff but because it was sad to go through it, I put it all in a box in the top of my closet which resulted in memory clutter and deferred grief.

For much of my life, I've allowed the stuff to swallow up the sacred.

Side-note: Who can teach us how to let the stuff lead us to what really matters? Sometimes I wish it was my job to design a few classes that every student has to pass before graduating high school — how to do online banking, how to structure your day as a working adult, how to say a healthy goodbye. There's so much we have to learn on our own, isn't there?

This final point is basically what the episode is based on, but I couldn't get to it without saying all that other stuff first. So here it is.

### **Hints of your next right thing can be found in your last right thing.**

I have always found this to be true. Every book I've written has seeds of the next book embedded within it. If you look closely and have nothing better to do with your time, you can find all of those hints because endings always also carry the first string of new beginnings. We celebrate the first year of a baby but it heralds in her second year, too. We celebrate the wedding that ends the engagement but begins a lifetime together. We celebrate a graduation that ends the time of structured study but begins a time of continued learning in the world.

The sacred things we mark from the ending will be brought forth into our beginnings, not necessarily because of an external thing we bring with us, but because of the person we have become.

When things end, we come forth changed.

We would do well to take some time to pay attention to those changes, to mark them, to honor them and see how they might lead us forward.

When I'm facing, or in the midst of, or just beyond an ending,

Have I become more confident?

Has my heart expanded as a result of my experience?

Do I see gifts in small things?

What corner of the kingdom do I feel drawn to most?

When I look at people, do I see the image of God more quickly now?

In some ways for me and my own ending, school is safer than not school. School means someone else tells me what to focus on, where to spend my time, and what is important to remember. And while I've been a grown up for quite a long time by now and I know how to do things, I admit it's been nice for these last few years to trust someone else to design my learning curriculum. Because not school means now I have questions to answer, pathways to choose, and more decisions to make.

It always comes back to that, doesn't it? Decisions, choices, this path or that one, which way to go?

God is always forming us. And so often he uses the decision making process to do it.

Can you think of something in your life that ended without fanfare or acknowledgment? Maybe it's time to name it.

Is there a small thing you can put a period on an ending in a life-giving, appropriate way?

Maybe its time to say a formal goodbye, have a small (or big!) celebration, or even simply to light a candle to mark a memory.

What about all your stuff?

Have you put the stuff of your experience into a box to go through later?

Might it be time to pull the box out and allow the stuff to lead you to the sacred gifts the experience has to bring your way — the transformation that happened in your mind, your body, and your heart as a result of that time in your life?

If you're not ready, that's okay too. Our friend Jesus can help you to know when the time is right. You can trust him with that.

Maybe you've marked the ending, you've allowed the stuff to lead you to the sacred work, but you're still wondering what your next right thing might be.

Take a little time to be silent and to be still. To be watchful. To bear witness.

If you can't yet see a new spark, a small shoot, or the start of a new thing, take heart. Ask Jesus what you are to look for. Remain open to seeing things in a way you might not expect.

If nothing comes, be gentle with yourself. We don't stop living just because we are unsure. We continue on, trusting in the King of the Kingdom as we simply do our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 82 of *The Next Right Thing*.

If you want even more help finding hints of a beginning folded within a current ending, Episode 3 of this podcast might help with that or chapter 9 of *The Next Right Thing* book.

As always you can find me at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. So, we will root for each other as we learn to put a period on our own experience. As we learn to allow all of our stuff to lead us to the sacred transformation that is happening within us. As we reflect on our last right thing, we will look together for hints of our next right thing.

I'll close with a few words from one of my favorites, Parker J. Palmer. I think I've quoted him possibly more than any other author on this podcast, but here are a few lines from a poem called *For the Interim Time*:

“Everyone has lost sight of your heart  
And you can see nowhere to put your trust;  
You know you have to make your own way through.

As far as you can, hold your confidence.  
Do not allow your confusion to squander  
This call which is loosening  
Your roots in false ground,  
That you might come free  
From all you have outgrown.

What is being transfigured here is your mind,  
And it is difficult and slow to become new.  
The more faithfully you can endure here,  
The more refined your heart will become  
For your arrival in the new dawn.”

Thanks for listening, and I’ll see you next time.