



83: Remember What Is More Important Than Your Decision

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 83.

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.

I can't tell you how many times in a week I will hear from a new listener who will tell me they just started listening to The Next Right Thing but they're only on episode 10 or episode 25 and every single time I hear that, I'm equal parts surprised and impressed. Because, I never expect that people will start from the beginning and try to catch up and go in order but that continues to be what people do and I kind of love it.

Still, what you get here in these 10 - 15 minute podcast episodes is less step-by-step curriculum (like first do this then do that) but more "and another thing." In other words, they're never exhaustive. These episodes always represent something I'm learning, thinking about, or wanting to explore further. So I'll create an episode for Tuesday and by Thursday I have 10 more episode ideas about that very same topic. I can't fully decide if this is a fantastic problem or a fantastic pain — I guess it depends on the day.

Nevertheless, each week I talk about decisions and discernment, I'll share stories from my own life as well as from the world we live in, about moments of choice we encounter, both big and small. I try to offer practical help on how to move forward with your next right thing when you

feel stuck, when you choose wrong, when you don't feel ready, when you are offended, and when you're learning to say goodbye.

But the most meaningful practical help has to be rooted in something bigger. Today I'm stepping away from the daily nuts and bolts of decision-making to remind us what it's all about. Yes, we want to make better decisions. More, we want to make decisions in a better way — but what does that mean, exactly? Listen in.

I recently finished reading a book called *Visions of Vocation* where author Steven Garber dives deep into the implications our vocation has on the wholeness of our lives. Not only our work like we often think, but also our relationships and responsibilities in the world. As I read, I found myself continuing to take notes about decisions and the decision-making process, a subject that is becoming a pillar of my own vocation and one I'm endlessly fascinated by.

At the most basic level, making decisions in a better way starts with understanding that we don't make decisions in a vacuum. There are too many factors at play that give color, texture, and nuance to every single decision we make, even the small ones. As much as we may think otherwise, it's impossible to approach decisions apart from who we are because our choices are born out of our character.

What we decide is tied to the person we are and the person we're becoming.

Toward the end of *Visions of Vocation*, Garber brings up Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*, by the way, I was going to try and say that Frenchish but I couldn't bring myself to do it, but you know the book I'm talking about. He points out the life of the Bishop in the novel. While the play and the movies that have come after the book only show the part of his life that intersects with Jean Valjean, the novel spends over a hundred pages to show the reader who the bishop was and the story that shaped his life in such a way that he saw the needs of the world and what was his to care for.

What we don't know about the history of the bishop, we can infer from the choices he makes. First, he opens his door to a stranger. Then, he shares his table, his home, and his trust. And in

the morning, when the Bishop discovers his guest has stolen the silverware, the bishop discerns his next right thing is to offer the candlesticks, too.

As Garber points out, “When you get to know the man, you understand why his instinct was to show mercy.”

I guess that’s what’s standing out to me today. Not necessarily the choice itself although his generosity is radical to the point of seeming foolish, but what stands out is the instinct that made the choice so obvious for the bishop.

Because I don’t know about you, but left to myself, my instincts don’t tend toward sharing and generosity. That has to be groomed and shaped. Just like being a writer or a basketball player or a pianist doesn’t happen overnight, neither does being kind, generous, trusting or trustworthy.

In our last episode, I shared about the fine art of finding a new beginning within the ending, how our next right thing often hides within the folds of our last right thing. I also mentioned how a lot of the most important things in life are things they don’t teach us in school and how I wish, in addition to algebra and history, we might also add online banking and how to say a healthy goodbye to our high school curriculum. Now since I’ve already started to develop my fake high school class schedule, I’ll add this one: Humanity 101: How to become a person whose instinct it is to show mercy to people who don’t deserve it. That class I’m sure would be standing room only.

I joke about it, in a way, but this is the important stuff in life.

Is it possible to move through a broken world as broken people without our instinct being to break everything in our path?

How can we learn to pay attention to the pain around us without letting the pain control us?

In Garber’s book, he asks a similar question: *Can you know the world and still love it?*

These are not simple questions and I don't intend to resolve them in a 10-15 minute podcast episode. But when the answers aren't simple, it may be even more important to continue to ask the questions.

When it comes to pivotal moments in my own life, what does my instinct lead me to do?

I can't say it better than Iris Murdoch so I'll quote her here: "At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over."

She said succinctly what I've been trying to say in 83 episodes — that the decision is rarely the point. The point is the person I'm becoming. The point is how the decision-making process informs and shapes me in such a way that my instinctual choice is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The point is to understand that the habits in my life, the way I spend my time, the things I choose to focus on — these things are shaping me. And they will always impact my decisions for better or for worse.

We can't live our lives distracted, angry, hurt, overwhelmed, afraid, and exhausted and then expect to somehow be able to make a thoughtful, wise, wholehearted decision about our job, our family, or our children's future.

At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.

Again, I don't have easy answers. But I do have simple encouragement. The person you are becoming matters.

The faith that's being built within you as you move into an unknown future might seem invisible now, but as you continue to move into the world, your faith will be for you a foundation to lean on in times of difficulty.

The patience you're cultivating with your two year old might seem endless and forgettable now, but it matters.

That late night conversation with your teenage daughter, the one that only seems to happen exactly four hours after your preferred bedtime but you stay up with her anyway? That matters.

The years you've been waiting for answers that seem to never, ever, ever come, every second of those years matter.

The choice to sit in silence with Jesus even though you don't have words to pray because everything just feels so hard, that matters.

Making the cake, folding the laundry, tending the garden, driving the carpool, writing the proposal, asking the question, cleaning the toilet again. It all matters.

It's important what job you take, which house you live in, which volunteer opportunities you say yes and no too. But these are secondary in comparison to the person you're becoming.

The person you're becoming will carry on beyond you, in the minds and hearts of the people you love and the people who love you.

May we be people whose instinct it is to move through the world as ones who live in the kingdom of God so that our choices always reflect the love of the Father, the power of the Son, and the compassion of the Holy Spirit as we continue to do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 83 of The Next Right Thing.

I always appreciate your faithfulness to listen as I move through the world of discernment always with a different lens sometimes a telescope and sometimes a microscope. Either way it's always better to learn together and I'm ever grateful for your companionship as we walk this meandering path of learning both what it means to make better decisions and how to make them in a better way.

As always you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. And a quick note if you are someone who, like me, processes the world first through writing words down, you might want to check out hope*writers that's another place you can find me. It's the online membership community I helped create nearly 4 years ago to encourage writers to pivot from writing words in secret to actually writing words for a reader.

If you want practical help to navigate the artistic world of writing and the business world of publishing, check us out at hopewriters.com where you'll find a community of kind, encouraging, working writers who have a lot of the same questions you do. Visit hopewriters.com to learn more and take our free quiz to help you know where you are on the writing path. We only open our doors to new members a few times a year and this happens to be one of those times so it's a good time to check us out at hopewriters.com

Since I've quoted *Visions of Vocation* several times already, it only makes sense to end with it as well. Here are some final words from the end of the first chapter:

“As the poet Bob Dylan once sang, ‘Everything is broken.’ And so we must not be romantics. But the story of sorrow is not the whole story of life either. There is also wonder and glory, joy and meaning, in the vocations that are ours. There is good work to be done by every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve all over the face of the earth. There are flowers to be grown, songs to be sung, bread to be baked, justice to be done, mercy to be shown, beauty to be created, good stories to be told, fields to farm and children to educate. All day, every day, there are both wounds and wonders at the very heart of life, if we have eyes to see. And seeing is where vocation begins.”