



89: Come Back With Peace

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 89.

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 even if you're great at making decisions, but 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. Every Tuesday, I'll share a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. In my last episode, I shared about the importance of coming away for a while. Today, I'll share about the equally important task of coming back. Listen in.

Well, if you're new around here, you might not know that I've been on a short sabbatical from my work and that includes recording and releasing episodes of this podcast. It'll be unnoticeable if you're listening later, but for those of you who are in real time, faithful listeners, well then you know it's been about six weeks since our last episode. And P.S., you're the best and I love you and your hair is so pretty.

In the last episode, Episode 88, I mentioned a quote from Susan Cain, author of *Quiet*, who says, "Solitude is a crucial and underrated ingredient for creativity."

In solitude in this case that she's talking about here implies something else, silence. You know what also requires solitude, silence and creativity? Decision-making. For better or worse, making decisions is a lifelong practice. It's one we can't delegate, graduate from or grow out of.

Of the many things making decisions often require of us, our creative imagination is most certainly one of them. If you think the decision-making process is simply a fact-gathering exercise, consider what we do with the facts once we have them. We imagine the outcomes. If I choose this, then this thing might happen. If I choose that, it could lead to this.

All those scenarios, they happen without much effort and we play them out in our minds naturally. Sometimes we do this in productive ways with whiteboards and healthy conversation and lists. Other times though, we imagine scenarios in more unproductive ways with tossing and turning in the middle of the night.

If we don't give ourselves a bit of time and space to consider possibilities, to sit with potential, to let ideas and scenarios play out for a while, then our imagination will just do its knee-jerk thing. We'll make our decisions not based on our gifting, our calling or what matters most, we'll just make them to avoid pain, to avoid discomfort, disappointing others or sometimes just to get the decision out of the way. The bigger the decision, the greater the need for silence, solitude, and creativity.

And so I had several reasons for my own sabbatical and I mentioned some of those in the last episode. Mainly it's because in order to uphold the integrity of my own calling to help create space for your soul to breathe, I have to create space for my own. So that's what I did.

While a lot has happened in those six weeks, for almost half of that time, not quite, but almost, I was in London. On July 6, Meghan and Harry's baby Archie was christened at Windsor Chapel. I don't know if you heard, but while it happened, we stood outside. We did not see any royals, but we did see a flower delivery van leave the castle, and on the side was the logo of the same company that did the flowers for the evening reception at Meghan and Harry's wedding. And I was very proud of myself for this moment of sleuthing brilliance, which at the time felt like a very big deal.

Well, another closer to home event. . .last month, this podcast quietly passed four million downloads and last week we passed the two-year anniversary of launching The Next Right Thing podcast.

In more global news, July 19th, 2019 marked 50 years since Apollo 11 made the historic trip to the surface of the moon. While history always highlights the moon walk, the truth is we would be telling

a very different story if the astronauts had not returned home safely. As even the most space-ignorant humans know, in an atmospheric reentry, a million things can go wrong. Doing some light research on the topic of atmospheric reentry, I feel very smart when I say this, there are two main types, uncontrolled like space debris hurling through the atmosphere and controlled like a spacecraft coming home on a preplanned path, just like divers coming up to the surface from the depths of the ocean or climbers coming down to the surface from the heights of the mountains.

Coming back is not one swift movement. There are intervals to consider and pauses to take and all of that takes some time. They say when astronauts return to Earth after being in space even for just a few weeks, they feel about five times heavier than they expect when they walk around. The longer in space, the greater the impact. In 1969, when Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins landed on Earth after their historic lunar landing mission, they had to wear isolation suits in case they brought microbes back from the moon and they were even sprayed with disinfectant. All I picture is President Nixon spraying them down with Lysol. They didn't have to stay in the suits the whole time, but they did have to stay in isolation for a full three weeks before they were reunited with their families. When Scott Kelly returned to Earth after a year in orbit just a few years ago, his feet still hurt two months after being back in gravity.

Reentry has a lot of implications on the body of an astronaut, but the first transition happens between space and the Earth's atmosphere. A controlled reentry has three movements, entry, descent, and landing, or EDL in space terms. Again, look how smart I got on my sabbatical y'all. I cannot even take it. So this EDL or this injury, descent and landing, it's all about dissipating the energy to ensure a smoother landing by using rockets and parachutes and all kinds of other things that I don't even know. But even then, landing on Earth from space in a capsule is described as a series of car crashes. That's how it can feel to the astronauts inside the capsule. For all the emphasis put on missions to space and what happens once they get there, those missions would be incomplete without a solid plan to get them safely home. Rob Maddock is with the Langley Group who played a key role in EDL simulations and he was quoted as saying, "We run simulations given all of the unknowns so that we can safely land where we want to. The atmosphere is the biggest uncertainty."

When I was planning for my own time away, I admit I was mostly focused on two things, preparation and duration, the before and the during. First, I knew I needed to get everything in order for leaving.

I had to delegate tasks and put things on hold, create an away message for my email. I had endless conversations with as many people as I could and I still knew I couldn't possibly cover everything that needed covering in time. At some point, I just had to let things go and trust the people put in charge of my place could do the job that they had. It's a real practice and it's not easy, but I did that and I made all the necessary, at least what I thought was necessary, preparations for taking time away.

But second, most obvious, I was really focused on what I was going to do during the duration of my time away. What books did I want to read? What questions did I want to carry? What rhythms would I follow during this extra time off? Well, I can't help it. I do plan to share some of those things with you in the following weeks. But for as much attention as I gave, preparing to leave and then going away, I only gave a glancing look to an important element of my sabbatical, reentry. How would I plan to come back? As it went, I got lucky. I made two decisions that I think made all the difference and y'all, I promise you I stumbled on them both on accident. If you're planning to take an extended time off or even a short time off, honestly some version of these two things might help you as well.

The first was in the back of my mind, I sort of half-planned for my last week of sabbatical to be a transition week. I would work but I wouldn't tell anyone. I would plan but I wouldn't act. I wasn't sure if that was dumb or brilliant, but it felt right and for me it turned out it was right. That final week of sabbatical came with some surprises in transition that I wasn't expecting. If there's one thing you can count on when you're away from your work for any amount of time really, it's that there's going to be some surprises when you get back even when you're only back halfway. I didn't realize early on how much I was going to need that in between working but not all the way working week. It was crucial to give myself permission to take that final week off for letting my mind go into work mode even if my vacation responder was still on. It was important for me personally to make a clear decision and then put away any guilt about "wasting my sabbatical" by thinking about work that final week.

But let me tell you, what made that even better was the second decision that I made. And this one I completely stumbled into. At the end of that semi-work week, I scheduled a short personal retreat. This was a last minute add-on scheduled in somewhat of a sloppy panic when I realized I was going to be returning to work soon, and I thought, "Oh, I just need like one more day to really focus and think." So I decided to take an overnight away and completely unplug. My friend and teacher, Kees Keesler, talks about the importance of having this kind of day take place outside of your own ZIP code, and I

think that's true. So I booked a room outside of my own ZIP code and this night away was a needed expression for me personally to have some time with my friend Jesus with a little bit of knowledge of what I was headed back into because I had that kind of semi-work week already.

It was a way to end the sabbatical experience with a short time of thanksgiving, of silence and true physical rest. It was imperfect and I questioned my own timing while I was there. I honestly cried half the time and I still don't fully know why, but I also trust that God often works within us things we can't see or understand. And the simple act of one final time of solitude with him was not going to be a waste. So both of those things, a transition week and a final solitude night for closure and reflection, well they didn't guarantee a smooth reentry. There were definitely still a few times I felt like the astronauts in the capsule headed toward Earth experiencing a series of car crashes during entry, descent and landing. Reentry may not be smooth, it may not be easy, but bumps and bruises don't mean you're unsafe. They don't mean you did it wrong. They may mean that you are exactly where you're supposed to be.

But this work, this calling, this invitation you have to live with God and people and coworkers and neighbors, well sometimes it's just bumpy. Time away is necessary. Reentry is tricky. But our Father is kind and nothing takes him by surprise. Whether you plan to take some time off in the future, have had some time off and are now planning your return, or even honestly if you just struggle to move from having the weekend off to entering into the Monday morning chaos in a way that feels life-giving, coming back with peace doesn't mean all goes well. It means your faith is in the one who holds all things together, even when it feels like things are falling apart. So where are you anticipating a reentry of your own? Is there something you can do in the transition that feels life-giving to you? I wonder what that might be.

What might God be saying to you as you prepare to move from one way of being to another? Maybe move from being with one group of people to another, one home to another, one job to another, the transition. In this transition, what's God's invitation to you? Are you willing to carry peace with you into the next room even if the t's aren't crossed and the beds aren't made and everything feels crazy? May the love of the Father, the courage of the Son and the comfort of the Holy Spirit be with you as you continue to do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 89 of The Next Right Thing.

Well, I mentioned it in passing in this episode, but it's still so hard for me to believe The Next Right Thing podcast is two years old. I would never have imagined four million downloads and a bestselling book would come out of this in just two years. That book is, as you hopefully already know, called *The Next Right Thing*. And if you haven't already, of course you can find it at your local bookstore. If you're traveling in the US, keep an eye out at those airport bookstore tables too where *The Next Right Thing* has been well-stocked since spring.

But listen, of all the things I couldn't have imagined in two years as a result of this podcast, the most important one is you. Your notes, emails, DMs, text messages, letters, smoke signals, and your podcast reviews continue to remind me, wow, we're a generation of people who long to keep first things first, but sometimes we get caught up and sometimes we get lost along the way.

Our deepest longing and our sweetest priorities sometimes hide themselves beneath the piles of our everyday life. And I'll tell you, it's a humbling honor to serve you for a few minutes every Tuesday reminding you, but mostly me, how we can know Jesus even in the midst of the unknowing of everything else and that we don't have to know the next hundred things, we just have to trust him with the next right thing in front of us.

In closing, here are some final words from Frederick Buechner in a little book he wrote called *Whistling in the Dark*. He says,

“The worst things will surely happen no matter what. That is to be understood. But beyond all our power to understand,” Paul writes, “we will have peace both in heart and in mind. We are as sure to be in trouble as the sparks fly upward, but we will also be in Christ.”

Thanks for listening and I'll be so glad to see you next time.