



Episode 03: Make the Most Important List

Life is filled with choices and many of them we make without much thought. But when it comes to choosing between two equally good things (or worse, two equally awful things) how do we know when to say yes and when to say no?

Today I'll share with you a simple practice that could help make saying yes and no a bit more clear.

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 3, Make the Most Important List.

If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second-guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. 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've ever searched "how to make a decision" on the internet, well, you're in the right place.

In Episode 2, I shared the one question I ask now before every hard decision.

After asking myself that simple question, I decided to say yes to an invitation that I had previously been afraid to commit to.

That raises a bigger question, did I make the *right* decision? How do we know when to say yes and when to say no? That's what I want to tackle today.

But before we do, consider this for just a moment, what a privilege it is to have a choice to make at all. We live in a world where many people don't have the luxury of choice in certain areas and

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this entire episode, really the entire podcast, presupposes we are in a position in life that choices are ours to make.

In many circumstances and for many people, that's simply not always the case.

I hope you'll listen with the understanding that we all have a different degree of control over various areas of our lives depending on our age, our season, our family life, our degree of privilege either because of our race, gender, or financial situation, and so on forever.

I'll invite you as you listen to bring to mind those areas in your life where you do have a choice, no matter how small.

Be willing to hold your choices with an open hand and see them from a different perspective.

Where to live, where to work, how to school, or even what to make for dinner. From small choices with little consequence to bigger choices with greater consequence: all of these decisions pull hard at our need to think clearly, to organize our thoughts, and to make the best possible choices with the information we have.

One of the ways we were taught to sort through our thoughts is to make a pro/con list.

I recently watched the episode of Gilmore Girls where Rory has to decide what college she wants to go to. For the fans, that's Season 3 Ep. 17 "A Tale of Poes and Fire." Of course, she makes a pro/con list. And by making the list, rule-follower that she is, she vows to obey the list, whatever it may say. At the end of the episode, when she finally makes her decision (I vow not to give spoilers even though it's been fourteen years since that episode aired but anyway), at the end of the episode, the camera zooms in to her pro-con list showing the winning school to have more pros than the losing school.

Confession time, my default opinion is that pro/con lists are kind of dumb. I put them in the same category as key lime pie and pictures of bare feet on the internet. No thank you.

And listen, I hold fast to that opinion until I find myself having to decide between two great things, or two terrible things, or two equally impossible-to-choose-from things.

Once you're staring down a huge decision and you just can't figure out what to do, it's easy to become that cliché that you hate, pull out a sheet of college ruled paper, draw a line down the middle and start organizing all thoughts and details into columns beneath a plus and minus sign.

Ask me how I know.

The good thing about a pro/con list? It can help you work out what you actually think about things. Writing things down in a methodical fashion has a way of clearing the mind, allowing yourself to make sense of something that you might otherwise have trouble deciphering.

But a pro/con list has at least one major flaw: it assumes every line item weighs an equal amount. And we all know they don't.

A list could have 10 cons on it and only one pro. But if that one pro is your family or your health or your safety and well-being, well then that one item on the pro list outweighs all the items on the con list.

Another major flaw with the pro/con list? We tend to make them only when we're feeling desperate, under the pressure of a deadline. Our final call on an important decision is fast-approaching and the pressure is mounting. Regardless of the outcome, I don't enjoy making decisions under pressure.

So why not make a different kind of list?

Obviously it's not always possible to avoid making decisions under pressure. But it *is* possible to give ourselves our best chance at lightening the load.

Here on this podcast, my goal is to help you create space for your soul to breathe so you can discern your next right thing.

Sometimes we have trouble knowing what to do next because we're in a season of busy-ness and hustle and we just need someone to remind us to slow down, take a breath, and simply do the next right thing.

Other times, though, we might be nearing the end of a season and looking ahead, and we need someone to help us discern what our future next right things might be. We need a way to make saying yes and no easier so that every single decision doesn't weigh so much.

I think we can all relate to saying yes to things we wish we had said no to and saying no to things when we wish we could have said yes. We make that pro/con list when we're in the middle of a hard choice and our decision is imminent.

But the most important list that I want to talk about today helps us to intentionally discern our yeses and our noes before the time comes to make the decision in the first place. I call that most important list a Life Energy List (one day I'm going to come up with a better name for it). This list is pre-emptive, it's not reactive. Obviously it won't eliminate your need to decide things, but it could serve as a helpful filter for future decisions.

Right now as this episode goes live, it's the end of the summer in the Northern Hemisphere and for many of us the beginning of the school year. What we normally do is we race into the next season without considering the one we just moved through. That's normal and understandable, but it could also be costing us something and we may not realize it until we approach that same season a year from now.

Now, while this season is fresh in your mind, take a few minutes, no more than 30 and you might not need that much, and make a life-energy list for the summer or season you just experienced.

Instead of making a pro/con list about a specific decision for the near future, take a little time to intentionally look back and ask yourself two questions when you consider the activities of your summer.

What was life-draining?

What was life-giving?

It's simple. It's revealing. And here's how it works.

Choose whatever areas are most relevant for you and your life right now. For me, I tend to reflect on three broad main areas: personal, relational, and actionable and that final category tends to include my work related tasks.

Again, you can decide which categories are most relevant for you in your life right now. You might just want to choose one of those areas and really break it down.

But, here is how it looks for me. First, I think about my personal life. So that includes the spiritual disciplines I engaged in this summer, mentoring relationships I might have, Sabbath practices, movement and exercise and my own reading habits.

Relationally, I might think about our community group activity for the summer, what volunteer commitments I had over the summer, mastermind groups I might be involved with, time with friends, date nights with John, daily life with family, time with other couples and any traveling we might have done.

Finally, I'll look at the things I had to take action on. Maybe more specifically my work, like content I created, business partnerships that I decided to engage in, my daily work schedule, workshops I attended and even in our home life, maybe how I did my meal planning, how that worked or didn't work, any work related travel I might have, any brainstorming I had for new projects.

Again, however it works for you in your personal life, in your life with family and friends, and also in the things you decided to do or had to do or were required to do for your work. So you look at all of the areas of your life and you get to choose which areas are most important for you.

Take travel for example.

Did you go on a family vacation this year? If so, where?

How often did you travel this summer?

Who went with you?

Who didn't go?

Was that trip life giving or life draining? Overall, when you think of it, does your body lift when you imagine that time, or does it sink?

Here's why this is important, sometimes we don't let ourselves re-evaluate the things we've always done. We simply do them because that's what we do.

Now, this list does not need to be exhaustive. And I also realize we can't eliminate the life-draining things. That's not what this is for. We will always have things we HAVE to do in our lives no matter how we feel about them. It's called being a grown up. You will discover things on your life-draining list that you cannot remove or avoid.

But the truth remains we always have things in our life that we say yes and no to based on knee-jerk reactions, expectations, or fear.

Here's a tip: there may be things on your list that feel life-draining, but the *result* of that thing is actually life-giving. For example, maybe it drains you to think of having people over to your house. Maybe you are an introvert and quite honestly would rather be alone.

But you also value connection with people, that is life-giving to you. As a result, having people over might show up on both lists for you. In fact when you look back over your summer and you think back to when you had people over and in your mind right now, having already been through it, it might seem, that was life giving. But next weekend when you have the opportunity to have people over it might feel life draining on the front end. But it helps to remember, you know what, this summer when I had people over, on the front end it might have felt life draining, but that is not what I remember. What I remember is how much life it gave me and I want to do that again.

The life-energy list is simply one more tool to help you pay attention to your actual life so that you can discern what your next right thing might be.

It helps you to listen to your life and let your past decisions inform future ones.

Consider the events, commitments, and choices you made this summer or whatever your previous time-frame or season is, hold them for a moment in your mind, and ask yourself if they gave life or drained life. And then write it down.

I never have to think twice or wonder. I always know as soon as I name them. You will, too.

You can make this list as often as is appropriate from daily to quarterly, maybe even yearly, but I suggest you do it a little more often than that.

What is life-giving, both for you and your family and for those people around you?

Your current life will give you hints, it always does.

Your body gives you hints.

Your mood gives you hints.

Your family will give you hints.

This is a practice in collecting the clues from your life and getting them down on paper so that when opportunities, commitments, and requests come your way in the future, you will be able to consider them with information from your actual life rather than frantic speculation and last minute pro/con lists.

In the previous episode, (episode 02) I shared with you about a difficult decision I needed to make several years ago. It was hard for me to know if I should say yes or if I should say no to a trip I was invited to go on. I felt lost, untethered, and unsure.

But if I had been in the practice of paying attention to what drained life and what gave life, I really believe that decision would have come more quickly to me. I believe I would have been able to say yes sooner and with more confidence.

Does that mean if I had said no to that trip that it would have been wrong?

I think that's actually the wrong question, I obsess too much over which decision is right and which is wrong. Instead, I think it's important to realize that while sometimes there is a morally right or wrong decision, most of our daily decisions aren't so black and white.

Here's the truth: you can only make decisions based on what you know at the time. And I know how hard that feels.

We live in an outcomes-based culture, where the correctness of our choice often is based on the success of the result. That might work in some situations, but is that really how we want to live our lives?

Successful outcomes might look great on paper, but we want to build our lives on love, on faith, on connectedness, redemption, laughter, whole-heartedness, joy and peace.

So the question isn't so much about what would be the *right* choice for us to make in a given situation. Instead, consider the *life* choice.

Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life. When we walk with him, consider his presence with us, then we can trust he will lead us toward life so that even in the things that feel draining we can trust him as our life.

Today if you feel more like a robot with a to-do list in your hand rather than an artist with wonder in your eyes, maybe stop.

Close your eyes, open one hand in your lap and put the other on your heart and ask yourself, *what am I longing for in this moment?*

What is life giving?

If you do this, you might be surprised what you discover but don't be surprised by the tears. Those tiny messengers are your kind companions, sent from the deepest part of who you are to remind you of what makes you come alive.

Listen to them and wake up to your heartbeat.

Ruth Haley Barton in her book *Sacred Rhythms* says this:

“Jesus himself routinely asked people questions that helped them to get in touch with their desires and name it in his presence. He often brought focus and clarity to his interactions with those who were spiritually hungry by asking them, *What do you want? What do you want me to do for you?* Such questions had the power to elicit deeply honest reflection in the person to whom they were addressed, and opened the way for Christ to lead them into deeper levels of spiritual truth and healing.”

No matter the choice you make today or in the future, Jesus is with you.

He has gone before you.

And he will remain with you no matter the result.

And so, a simple prayer.

As pool bags are replaced with school bags,
As we move into a new season, remind us of all the ways you are with us.
We admit we'd like to know the plan before we agree to it, but we're beginning to understand that's not really how You roll.
You told Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father's household, but you didn't tell him exactly where he was going.
You told Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, but You didn't give him a five-week plan.
You told Mary she would have a Son and call His name Jesus, but she wasn't offered assurance of His safety or guarantees that her life would go smoothly.
You are not a God who offers clear steps.
But you invited Abraham outside and told him to look up at the stars, *so shall your offspring be*.
You gave Moses a vision of a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.
You whispered salvation for the whole world in Mary's ear.
You never promised clarity. But You always gave a hopeful vision. And You always promise presence.
I will go with you wherever you go. Do not be afraid.
As we take a little time to look back at our lives, give us the courage to admit what was hard and embrace what we love.
Remind us to move toward life, again and again.
We ask today for a hopeful vision of the future even while we sit with question marks.
Thank You for being with us, within us and never leaving us alone.

Thanks for listening to Episode 3 of The Next Right Thing. You can access the show notes and a full transcript when you visit thenextrightingpodcast.com. You can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and at emilypfreeman.com

We're a few weeks in to this new podcast, and I've loved hearing from you on Instagram and through email. To those of you who have left reviews, thank you. I can't tell you how helpful and encouraging that is and I hope these short episodes continue to help you create a little more space for your soul to breathe so you can discern your next right thing.

In closing, here's a question to consider from author Parker J. Palmer in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*: "*Is the life you're living the same life that wants to live in you? Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.*"