



## 163: Reflection as Activism

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 163.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting home of entertainment, well, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. For years, the practice of reflection has been an integral part of my own personal development and spiritual formation. And today's episode sponsor could be one tool to help you in your own practice of reflection. The, between places journal is a beautiful book of 100 prayer prompts by Stephanie May Wilson. You may be familiar with Stephanie, as she's the host of the Girls' Night podcast and author of the Lipstick Gospel.

I love what Stephanie's created with the guided prompts in the Between Places through thoughtful questions, passages of scripture, and room for prayerful reflection. She's given us a resource to explore the more uncertain aspects of our lives, while reminding us that God never leaves us. Not to mention the book itself is gorgeous with it's linen hardback cover, plus Stephanie includes plenty of room to take notes, ask questions, and even write down your own prayers as you explore your relationship with God. And right now you can get 15% off your purchase of the The Between Places 100 Days to Trusting God When You Don't Know What's Next, by going to [smaywilsonshop.com](http://smaywilsonshop.com) and using the promo code Next Right Thing. That's S-M-A-Y Wilsonshop.com and use the promo code Next Right Thing for 15% off your order. Now onto today's episode where we'll explore the role of reflection, and action. Listen in.

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As we continue to make our way into a new year, many of us are also navigating uncertain waters of change. Relationships that were once conflict free are filled with tension. Some beliefs and ideologies that used to bring comfort, now ring hollow, or at least they need more explanation, good health that once seemed normal, we now realize is an exceptional gift. From the way we do school to the way we plan for the future, every aspect of our personal lives has felt the impact of change in some way over the past year. There's a children's song we used to sing in Sunday school about how God's got the whole world in his hands, the mothers and the babies, you and me, brother, the wind and the rain, everybody and everything in his hands. With the smallest amount of research, I learned that song originated from God's people who were enslaved, a folk spiritual that varies in tune and lyric, but always comes back to God having the whole world in his hands.

The child in me wants to cling to that image of God who knows and sees all, who cares for everyone, who

brings harmony between brother and sister all over the world. But then the grownup me watches the news as the pain and injustice in the world and in our country rages wild, shining the light on the division and the racism that's still alive and active among us. Are we paying attention? Maybe the child has something to teach the grownup. Taking that song into context, consider how remarkable those simple lyrics are in light of who was singing them, and when, and where. What a legacy of faith, courage, and relentless hope. We witness dissonance in the world around us, when we see people make terrible choices on live TV, or in the parking lot of a Starbucks, or in the sanctuary of our churches, or in the halls of a federal building, and then we have to decide what to make for dinner that night, it's disorienting at best, traumatizing at worst.

Many of us me included want to know, "Yeah, but what can I do about this? What is my next right thing here? And why can't we all just get along? Why indeed?" Well, here's the thing. That question is not rhetorical, especially on a podcast about making decisions and discerning our next right thing. This might be the most appropriate place to try to answer that question, but the answers will not come easy, and the solutions will take work. I believe we're up for the task, I really do. We don't have to throw our hands up into the air and, "Oh, well," our way through life. We have a higher calling than that and there's too much work to do.

Now, I am a little tiny newborn baby, little tiny one, when it comes to learning what it means to be a true ally in the work of anti-racism. There are people who have dedicated their lives to educating us on that question, and I'm so grateful for them, about why there's disunity and what it might look like to change it. And listen, we've come a long way. It's true. And it's also true that we have a long way to go. With each passing day, I'm more and more convinced that a key part of moving forward is looking back. Not to get stuck, but to remember. And so as I've carried the question of my role towards healing and reconciliation in our country, an image has come to mind from my life. I didn't really want to share this story, I'll be quite honest with you, but it keeps on coming back and I can't seem to shake it. I've been a writer long enough to know the persistence of a story that wants to be told.

If I tell it, "No" it will get fussy and it's going to make my life miserable, so I'm just going to move on and share it. The conclusion will be sloppy and imperfect. I trust your journey with me anyway. Just before Christmas in 2015, my cousin, the son of my mom's baby sister was killed in a downtown intersection when a fistfight took a deadly turn. At the time of his death, he had completed nearly all of the requirements for earning his PhD. Those are the facts. I hadn't seen him in many years. We moved away from my childhood home when I was in the fourth grade, so we only saw extended family during the holidays and then sometimes not even then. My mom has a really large family, but my most recent memory of this particular cousin was as an awkward middle schooler playing video games with this little brother when I went to visit.

I also vaguely remember action figures and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but that might just be my imagination filling in the blanks. The main thing I remember about him are his eyes, round and brown and kind. The eyes of his mother, my aunt. The eyes of our grandfather too. They flew him back to Indiana to be buried. And my sister and I traveled together to attend the funeral. The gray wing of the airplane metal blending in with the gray backdrop of the sky, a perfectly timed duet. When we landed in Indianapolis, we collected our bags, we headed to the rental car area to pick up a car. After filling out the appropriate paperwork, we followed the instructions and found the car we'd reserved, parked just where they said it would be. And there in the parking spot was a small sedan waiting for us in all of her bright yellow glory.

I looked at my sister, and her eyes were as wide as mine. We were both thinking the same thing, “Can we really show up at our cousin’s funeral driving this bright yellow car?” Of course it was just a car, and maybe it was even silly of us for thinking about it that way. If you have a brightly colored car you’re going to drive it no matter the occasion, but we were in town just for the purpose of attending a funeral, and a yellow car seemed inappropriate. That cheery colored car waited in mockery, oblivious in its disrespect. Of course, we didn’t choose the car and we weren’t the ones who painted it yellow, but we were there to pay our respects to mourn the death of our handsome young, bright cousin. His whole future ahead of him taken away so needlessly, and we’re going to show up in a bright yellow car at the funeral, we’re going to follow the hearse carrying his body to the cemetery while we bee bopped behind it in a bright yellow sedan?

We felt like cartoons, but there wasn’t time or space to switch things out. We were both aware of how conspicuous we were and it might’ve even been funny if it hadn’t been so sad. So that image of the bright yellow car in the funeral procession has come back around to me a few times as we all navigated our way through 2020, especially since the turn of this new year, since the events at the Capitol on the afternoon of epiphany, since listening and watching as hundreds of years of tension continue to boil over, injuring us all. I’ve thought often of that yellow car, as I’ve continued to examine my own contribution to the divide in this country. Just because I didn’t start it, doesn’t mean I bear zero accountability. And it doesn’t mean I’m exempt from being an instrument of peace toward making a change. Annie Dillard in her book *The Writing Life*, famously wrote, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing.”

If that’s true, and of course it is, then we have to admit that the decisions we make become how we spend our hours and our days. And this is what makes our life. In the space where we talk about discernment and decision making every week, with my eyes open and my heart soft, this feels like an important conversation to continue. One of the simple gifts of having a Next Right Thing posture is it keeps me in this moment. It keeps me thinking about what it means to be an instrument of peace for the next 10 minutes, rather than how to create world peace until the end of time. We might be tempted to try to change the world with capital letters, but we’ll burn out before we start. Without reflection, we’re in danger of moving ahead without discernment our guide. If you’ve been around a while, first, hello, and second, I’m so glad. Then you know how deeply I value reflection. And not in a sentimental, wistful kind of way. And neither as a worry filled act of regret, but as a discipline.

I consider reflection to be a spiritual practice of discernment and wisdom. If we’re paying attention, reflection can be a form of activism and not a passive one. Personal decisions we made in the past are often our best teachers, both the wise and the unwise ones. The ones that resulted in wins and losses. The good, the bad, even the indifferent, all of our past decisions have something to teach us. Like George Santayana said in *The Life of Reason*, “Those who cannot learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.” But this is true across the board. It not only applies to our individual past, but also our collective one. Growing up in the white evangelical church, a lot of what I learned about growing in faith was how to have a personal relationship with Jesus. I’m grateful for the gifts of my spiritual upbringing, even though it was often imperfect and incomplete. I could do a whole episode. I could write a whole book on the gifts, on learning about my friend, Jesus, on believing that God is good and God is for me and God can be trusted.

But one of the less emphasized and therefore under developed aspects of my personal spiritual formation

is exactly that. It was personal. And so I lacked a full understanding of the importance of community. As I reflect, I learned the importance of church as in Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday at 6:00 PM for youth group. I learned about the activity of church things, the gathering of people, but I missed the part about how the church is more than just my church and how God's people don't always look like me. If our idea of spiritual formation only includes me and my personal relationship with God, then I'm missing the whole point. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he didn't leave us with written instructions. The New Testament came later. Parents leaving their toddlers to go on a date night, leave behind more detailed instructions than Jesus left. Instead of a list of instructions, he left behind a community. An imperfect forgetful, creative, biased, emotional, exhausted, brilliant, beloved community.

And he gave us a hint he was going to do that when he taught his disciples to pray, he used plural pronouns. "This is how you should pray. Our father give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Us, the whole world in his hands. But friends, we've heard each other and we keep on hurting each other. And so I have a few reflection questions that I've been asking myself over and over again for the sake of my own soul, my family, the church, and black indigenous people of color. What evil do I need delivering from? Through what bias lens do I see the world? What is the story I'm telling myself as I move through my one life? What is the story I've been told? Are the stories true? We know that unity is what we need, but as my friend and teacher Deidra Riggs states so plainly, "Unity is not a party favor." She would know. She wrote an entire book about unity. It's called *One*, and I highly recommend it.

But to talk about unity without first acknowledging the reason and the root of the sin of racism in this country feels a bit like driving a bright yellow car in a funeral procession. It's like 1 Corinthians 13, in the message version says, "If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy, but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate." So what does love call us to now? Love listens, without defensiveness, self-centering or a secret agenda. And when I listened to BIPOC, black indigenous people of color, they're telling us over and over again that unity requires confession and repentance and lament. Otherwise it's incongruent like a rusty gate, like a bright yellow car in the funeral procession. Let grief and lament do the work of naming the sin first, and then let's begin the work of uprooting it one confession, one conversation, one moment at a time. The good news is we don't do this as ones without hope.

Of course we have a hope, absolutely we do. But if we're not paying attention, engaging in rhetoric about hope and unity without first actively acknowledging the harm, could be hurting the very people we say we want to support. I don't want to offend the ones who are hurting the most by pointing too quickly to hope just to make myself feel better. There's nothing for any of us there. Instead we weep and we lament and we confess in the kingdom of God, but we do it with hope as our companion, because hope is our companion. It isn't wrong to long for unity, to trust in God, to point to the reconciliation that Jesus brings. But let's be honest about what that really means. What did it really take? "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me." The pathway to unity is the road to Calvary. Before reconciliation, there is confession and repentance. We are not betraying our faith to say so. We are living it all the way out, all of us together. So let's confess our individual sins, and also our collective sin.

Let's admit that for beauty to come from ashes, something has to burn. Let's be brave and ask our friend, Jesus, "What in me needs burning down today? And how can I cooperate with your spirit to rebuild it, clean it all the way up? What does it look like for me to be an instrument of peace for the next 10 minutes?"

Show me what needs to die and give me the courage to wear black to the funeral.” Our father who art in heaven hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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Thanks for listening to episode 163 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of reflection for activism can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it’s true this is a podcast about making decisions, but the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. Several women I’m listening to these days are Deidra Riggs, Dr. Lucretia Barry, Lisa Sharon Harper, Latasha Morrison, and Maddie James. And listen, they aren’t just teaching me about racism and anti-racism, they’re teaching me about joy and business and home decorating and style. I’m grateful for their generosity and I’m grateful to you. Thank you for coming along with me as I so imperfectly navigate my own Next Right Thing. I hope you’ll continue to join me.

As always, you can find me on Instagram @EmilyPFreeman, or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find the show notes and a transcript of this and every episode. In closing, a few words from that folk spiritual to remind us, God is always with us. “He’s got you and me brother in his hands. He’s got you and me sister in his hands. He’s got you and me brother and his hands. He’s got the whole world in his hands.” Thanks for listening, and I’ll see you next time.