



84: A Beginner's Guide to Self-Reflection

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 84.

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.

It's nearly the end of the month and the end of a season here in North Carolina the heat wave has hit with a vengeance and though we're still officially a month away from summer according to the solstice, apparently the temperature doesn't consult the calendar and these days are feeling more like July than May.

Whether you're transitioning from spring to summer like us here in the northern hemisphere or from autumn to winter in the southern, the end of a season means a chance to look back on purpose before moving forward.

Today I'm re-visiting a topic I've covered a few times during the life of this podcast and I guarantee I'll be covering it again because it's based on a spiritual practice that has changed my life and, I believe if you practice it regularly, it will change yours as well.

What is that spiritual practice? It's the practice of intentional reflection and today I'll take you through it one step at a time.

Author and teacher, Jan Johnson, says, “It’s not the experience that brings transformation, it’s our reflection upon our experience.” In my own life, I’ve mostly found this to be true.

As I said before, I’ve already devoted two episodes to this practice, as I think it’s foundational for healthy, soulful decision making. If we want to make more informed decisions, it makes sense to reflect upon past decisions we’ve already made. If you missed those episodes or want a refresher, the first is Episode 4: Record What you Learn — where I share how I keep a quarterly list of what I’m learning as a way of reflecting on my life. You can also learn more in Episode 61: Look Behind You: How reflection can help you make better decisions. In that one I walk through when I practice reflection, what I pay attention to in reflection and how I practically do it.

There are natural times throughout the year that many of us might do this — birthdays and anniversaries or that week between Christmas and the new year. What I’ve discovered, though, is for me it’s vital for me to reflect on purpose more often than once or twice a year. Not for sentimentality or reminiscing although I totally confess, I love that kind of stuff. But more importantly, for the sake of moving forward.

And so now, I want to focus on the how and hopefully offer you some simple questions to ask if you want to begin a practice of reflection but aren’t sure where to start.

It’s true, reflection is a bit easier if we do it as we go but if you aren’t in the habit of paying attention that way, here are a few simple ways to reflect on your life even if this is the first time you’ve ever thought of doing it:

Just start with this. Think about the last 3 months, for example, right now that would be March through May, and recall what made you feel happy. What was joyful? Life-giving? Lovely? Celebratory?

If that feels too hard or too deep, what is a favorite TV show you’ve been watching lately?

What is the best book you read in the past 3 months?

And when it comes to books and TV, has there been a line in a book, a scene in a movie or a show that you've been watching, or another piece of art that has brought emotion out in you? What was that emotion and what was the line?

What brought disappointment or sadness in the last 90 days? You don't have to stay here long, but jotting those things down can be helpful.

Think about a time in community where you laughed so hard it brought tears.

Was it something one of your children said or did?

An interaction with a friend or family member? Is there a reoccurring family story that always brings dependable humor?

Finally, write down some questions you are carrying around these days even if they are unresolved. These could be as practical as deciding what book to read next or deciding whether or not you should you accept a job offer. Or the questions that you are carrying these days could be more nuanced, like questions about parenting, about faith or your calling. Some of these things are more serious or important than others, but keeping them all on one list can help to remind you how life has many colors and depths and we do best when we're willing to hold them all together, sacred and silly alike.

At the time of this recording, like I said, it's nearly the end of May which means I'm doing my spring reflection on the past 3 months, March through May.

While reflection is a regular and beloved part of my own personal rhythm of life, I realize it might seem foreign or maybe even intimidating to some. Since this is one of those times of year when I engage in some intentional reflection, I thought I'd bring you along sharing what I specifically did in my own time of looking back and I hope it's helpful for you.

1. I Looked over my to-do lists from March through May.

This is as non-fancy as it gets. I literally pulled out my notebook where I keep my daily to-do lists and read over it. Here are the things I paid attention to:

How did I spend my time?

What items were consistently checked off?

For example, I always put my podcast episodes on my to-do list and they were always checked off.

What items were consistently left undone?

For me, phone calls I had to make, following up with people, errands I needed to run, and emails I wanted to remember to send. Those items got constantly pushed to the next day and the next day and those items sometimes never got checked off at all.

Another question I asked myself was what kinds of things was I planning for?

For example, I'm going to take a Sabbatical this summer. I've been taking notes over the last three months where I've taken notes on things I want to read, or retreats I'd like to take or things in the house I'd like to do.

And a final question I asked myself as I looked over the to-list was when I look at the daily activities that these to-do lists represent, what activities and plans were most life-giving during this time span? That's an important question to ask yourself too.

In addition to answering those 5 questions, here's another thing I paid attention to as I looked through my notebook.

2. Highlight the Quotes

The journal I use for to-do lists is also one I use for some note taking and daily reminders, including quotes that are meaningful or catch my attention as I'm listening to sermons or as I'm in conversation or even reading books. Every 3 months, I go back through and look over those quotes to notice patterns or clues to what I might be learning and where I might want to give some more attention.

For example, a few quotes that I wrote down this quarter:

One is from my Pastor, Todd Jones. He said, "It takes a community to know an individual."

I thought that one was so good and so informative of the value of everyone's perspective of one person brings that person into full color and we can get to know one other better when we get to learn each other in community.

Another quote that stuck out to me was from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*. He said, "The prayer of the morning will determine the day..." And that one especially spoke to me because it was that week that every time I sat down to pray, I found myself making a list instead.

And the final quote I wrote down in several places over the last three months was one from my sister. She mentioned it on one of the bonus episodes that I did when my book came out, the one with her. She simply said, "Do what you know. Use what you have. Finish what you started." I think those three simple lines speak for themselves.

While these quotes may not resonate as much with you, I wrote them down during this season because they were things I've been thinking a lot about: community, prayer, and productivity.

Once I looked over my to do lists and noticed any quotes that stood out, I put my notebook away and moved on to photos.

3. Look through photos.

For me personally, I used both the photo library on my phone or my computer as well as my Instagram account. Because of my book launch this quarter, I was more consistent on social media so those images for me capture a lot of what was happening in my life during this span of time.

So, for you, you may want to look for images that represent this period of time - family milestones, celebrations, insights, or regular, everyday moments you might have taken pictures of.

As I scrolled, here are some images that caught my eye.

One of those pictures as my first time in the New York Public Library

Another one I took was at Top of the Rock at 8 am Friday morning. I was the first one there in New York City and there was something really profound and thoughtful to be at the top of this skyscraper of a city of 8 million people.

I scrolled through photos from The Next Right Thing book launch party

I scrolled through screenshots of my book that was found in over 50 airports so far around the US. That was super fun. Thank you for sharing those by the way.

And of course in my photo feed, I'm going to find lots of photos of sky, budding peonies, and other nearly blooming flowers because it's springtime after all.

If you are someone who tends to take pictures of your life, going back and looking through your photos can be a lovely way to remind yourself what you love, who do you love, and who loves you and what are your favorite ways to spend your time.

4. Recall Current Events

Has there been anything in the news that has been particularly upsetting or uplifting for you? (Bear in mind it may not be something from the headlines - it could have been just a passing story you saw that has stayed with you or something that might not be news to other people but has deeply impacted you on some level.)

Has this quarter seen the release of something you've been waiting for - for example a particular book or movie? Have you read that book? Have you seen the movie? Was it meaningful to you? Why?

Is there a human interest story, an election, or a global crisis that's been weighing on your mind this quarter and showing up in your prayers?

Inevitably there will be events or happenings around the world that have an impact on us in ways we may not be able to plan for or expect. For example one of those things for me this quarter was that college admissions scandal. I don't know any of the people involved, but for a few weeks that news story affected me, so much that episode 75: Tell Yourself the Truth. That

was an episode was where I took a little bit of time to think through and dig a little bit deeper as to why this story was hanging with me.

More recently, the untimely death of author Rachel Held Evans brought a heavy shadow of grief.

Rachel was a fellow writer and a colleague. Though I never met her, I've read her writing for years and admired all the ways she was her full, authentic, feminine, brave, creative self in this world.

She was friend and sister to so many people I know, maybe even you, who's listening.

As her friends and family pushed through this untethering loss, the rest of us have found ways to hold vigil and bear witness. Hers is a loss I was so sorry to hear about.

Taking some time to reflect upon what I knew of her life and the impact she had on my own is sacred, important life honoring work.

5. Work + Life milestones

In our most recent episodes we have talked about some endings, and times of transitions and good-byes something that has been real prevalent in your own experience this last quarter. For me, I took some time to look at some major milestones from over the past 90 days. This one isn't always as relevant in other quarters as it was for me in this quarter. Some quarters are rather quiet in the milestone category. But other quarters will be filled with them and it's important to remember them, to mark them, and to celebrate in a way that is life-giving for you.

Personally for me, this quarter as you may well know, marked the release of *The Next Right Thing* book as well as my own graduation, this seemed like a good time to look at some milestones.

I saw my book in the airport for the first time.
The Next Right Thing hit several bestseller lists.

I finally graduated with my Masters in Spiritual Formation.
My girls have finished up drivers ed and are getting their permits.

In these months I've seen a full calendar, a lot of joy and gratitude, a few sleepless nights, but also health, deep friendships, and a lot of life. God continues to be with us in all of it.

I'll close with some questions for you to think about as you continue your own practice of reflection:

Again, these five movements that I've walked through in this episode are five of what could be many but this is just what I did this morning, in my own time of reflection when I thought about the past 90 days. At the end of the next season, I might do it a little differently. But hopefully, these steps have been helpful for you if you are just getting started if you are developing a rhythm of life that includes a time of intentional reflection.

As you look at your to do lists, journals, photos, world events, and personal and family milestones, what kind of energy was required of you over the past 90 days?

Have you been doing a lot of inward work?

Have there been times of loneliness, or of solitary learning?

Or was the energy required of you an outgoing and outward facing energy?

Was the pace too fast or too slow?

Did you live in a constant state of worry? Distraction? Anger? Gratitude?

Is there a word or phrase that comes to mind that could describe the last 3 months for you?

When you look ahead, what is a word or phrase you hope will describe the next 3 months?

As you begin or continue a regular practice of listening to your life, what is your life asking for the most?

What is one activity, memory, or practice you would like to take with you into the future?

Is there one you'd like to leave gently behind?

The practice of reflection is not one to keep us living in the past or wallowing in mistakes. Instead, it's a way to pause on purpose and listen to our life so that we can move forward with a little more confidence, a little more clarity, and a lot more intention.

May these moments of self-reflection serve us well in the days to come. May we hold on to what we need for the journey ahead and trust God to let us know what we might need to let go. May we allow our past decisions to inform our future ones as we simply do the next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 84 of The Next Right Thing.

At the end of every season, I share part of my own reflection list on my website. I've been doing this for years now on the last weekday of November, February, May, and August.

I shared some of my own personal lists of what I've learned in spring here in this episode but if you want to read a more complete list, you can visit the blog later this week where I'll share my own list and invite you to share yours at emilypfreeman.com

If you want even more help for reflection and design your own personal rhythm of life, my self-paced online class is available now - It's called Discern + Decide and I've got it on sale at a discount here before the summer months begin. There's a link in the show notes that will take you right to it or visit emilypfreeman.com and click on "class" in the top navigation.

I'll leave you with a quote from Leo Tolstoy who famously said, "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

When it comes to life transformation, reflection is a good place to start.