



Episode 19: Choose Your Absence

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to *The Next Right Thing*. You're listening to Episode 19.

If this is your first time listening in, welcome! After a few weeks off, I'm thrilled to be back in our Tuesday rhythm - doing my best to help you discern your next right thing in love.

I work hard to make sure these episodes are relentlessly helpful and mercifully short.

Because if you're desperate to discern your next right step, the last thing you need is a rambling podcast host.

So this is a place for anyone struggling with decision fatigue.

There could be many reasons why decision fatigue has crept into your life:

It could be a familiar life-long struggle you've always had with making decisions.

It could be seasonal or related to your life stage — the unfortunate consequence of a recent life transition, job change, relationship struggle, loss or promotion.

Today, though, I want to talk about a third possibility for your decision fatigue — something that may be adding to the mind clutter.

It's one many of us overlook or fail to consider, but we are especially vulnerable to here at the beginning of a new year.

What is that third phantom cause of decision fatigue? Listen in.

Because the point of today's episode is to help clear the clutter and help you find some peace for your schedule as well as your soul - peace you may not even realize you needed.

For the month of January, we're going to loosely structure our conversations around the concept of time - specifically how to find more of it.

An image comes to mind of the table in my Grandma Morland's kitchen. It was only cleared off twice a year that I can remember — Christmas Day and Easter Sunday.

Maybe, it was clear more often than that, but what I remember about her kitchen table was that most of the time it was stacked with newspapers, mail, bills, notepads, photographs, magazines, and those wonderfully thick Sears catalogs. If we needed to eat our cream-filled cookies or our popcorn covered in crazy mixed up salt, we would gently push a pile of papers toward the center of the table to make just enough space for our small paper towel.

If your soul has ever felt like Grandma Morland's kitchen table, imagine our weekly time here together in January as a practice in clearing it off.

Because whether you have a clear goal, plan, or vision for the year or if you *want* to have those things, one thing I know for sure you are going to need is time and space — either to implement those things that matter or to figure out what they are.

One of the qualities I value most in a person is someone who knows how to listen. If I see you are a good listener, my respect for you immediately grows.

If you don't look me in the eye or seem distracted, I may still like you but I probably won't trust you and I definitely won't confide in you.

I think that's probably true for most people. That's why one of the most attractive qualities in a person, a quality I long to possess more of, is presence.

Part of what it means to be a person of presence is to pay attention to what is happening around you - both your place and your people — as well as to pay attention to what is happening within you.

But we can't be present to everything all the time.

And so one way I'm going to suggest you learn to cultivate presence might sound at first, counter intuitive.

It's actually by your absence.

Not your absence from people or responsibility, but absence from the things that are keeping you from your people and your responsibilities - one thing in particular that may be causing you no small amount of stress and distraction.

What is it? Well, I can't say specifically but I can say in general it is anything that comes your way disguised as "a great opportunity"

For many of us January can be a month we all get high on hope, searching the horizon for what might be next.

Living attentive and paying attention is one of my favorite ways to live, but I've discovered if I do it in the wrong order by going outward before I move inward, then I may add to the stress and distraction in my life in ways I never intended to do.

Let's take a few minutes to dissect how this might play out in our real life.

It could come in an email, during a staff meeting, via a text, a private message, a personal invitation, or God forbid a phone call.

However it comes, it's an invitation for you to do something you didn't plan on or expect.

For example, maybe you're invited to take a trip, speak at a conference, participate in a group, apply for a particular job, serve on a board, write a column, teach a course, volunteer in a classroom.

I bet as I'm listing these things you already have something in mind.

For some of us, every new opportunity seems to have potential — this may be especially true for certain personality types.

Not only that but if you are already unclear or unsure of your own calling, you may have a tendency to say yes as a default to these kinds of opportunities. Over time, these reactionary yeses can take their toll and they could be the phantom cause of your current decision fatigue.

Now, it's true, some great opportunities are exactly that - great, fantastic even. I am not actually here to tell you to choose your absence from great opportunities.

I am here to remind you that just because someone presents an idea as a great one does not make it so. Every opportunity is not created equal and you get to decide whether something is great for you or not.

When an opportunity presents itself take a little time to consider where this opportunity will actually lead and call it that with English words.

Things often seem great when we leave them in ambiguity. But when we start getting down to the details, that is when we start to see the truth of things. For example,

Will you get paid for this?

Are the expectations clear?

Would you actually enjoy it?

Is it something you've always wanted to do?

If you were in a room of people and this was called out into the crowd, would you raise your hand to volunteer for it?

If this great opportunity is something you're not getting paid for, can't measure how much time it will take, can't clearly define, or something you kind of deep down know you don't really want to do it, this could be something you need to choose your absence from.

Now, here's why this is hard and why I'm dedicating an entire episode to it.

Because the phrase that haunts you is this one: “but it's such a great opportunity.”

When we say that, what we often mean is other people would jump at the chance and who am I to turn this down when other people would love to do it?

“Just because someone else would think it’s cool” is not a reason for you to say yes to it. I know that sounds like Middle School advice, but when I actually look at my own life, it is something that gives me pause.

So here’s a test.

If you have a decision to make about something you think might be a great opportunity, force yourself to finish this sentence: “I want to say yes to this because it would be a great opportunity to _____.”

The phrase “It’s a great opportunity” is not actually a complete sentence, at least not here.

A great opportunity to WHAT?

The literal definition of opportunity is “a set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something.”

So if it’s true that this thing is actually a great opportunity for you, you have to be able to finish the sentence.

I want to do this thing because it would be a great opportunity to

...See the world

...Love my neighbor

...Learn a new skill

...Meet new people

...Be with my kids

...Make one million dollars

...Serve my family

...Grow my business

These are all valid reasons for a person to do a thing. There's a million other valid reasons for a person to do a thing. But even these are not enough!

You have to go even one step further.

Let's use the phrase "this would be a good opportunity to grow my business."

Fine - but the next question is this: Is this a season of your life where you are working on growing your business? Is that part of what you've already decided is a high priority right now?

If yes - then go for it! This sounds like it could be great for you.

Here's the point - But just because someone else says it's a good opportunity, and just because it might lead to something you might want to have happen, doesn't make it an automatic yes for you.

When opportunities come your way, you have the opportunity (ha!) to discern between your values and your vanity.

Because let's be real - Often times I think something *could be* a great opportunity so I say yes out of a fear of missing out.

In my experience, it's about 1 out of 10 opportunities that turn out to be great. That's not exact math but just thinking about my own inbox and my own conversations that seems to be about right.

The other nine fall into one of these categories:

- A job
- An obligation
- A glorified favor

We call these things opportunities because we think maybe it's going to get us something we want, but often times if we really look hard at it, it's a myth.

Again, I'm not saying you should never say yes to those things.

We do jobs, we have obligations and we do people favors all the time. I'm just saying don't call them great opportunities.

I'm also saying, I hope, that even the ones that are great? Sometimes in order to remain true to your life, true to your people, and to your own calling, you need to turn them down and choose your absence from them.

My sister, Myquillyn, who online goes by The Nester, you can find her at nester.com, calls those things that people say are great opportunities but are actually not great at all — these are *flopportunities*. I think that's memorable and self-explanatory.

Now, if you're having particular difficulty choosing your absence in a certain area, it could help to listen to Episode 02 Do this Before Every hard Decision and maybe Episode 03: Make the Most Important List.

Episode 14: Know What You Want could also be helpful.

So let's start calling these what they are: either a favor, a job, or an obligation OR let's force ourselves to finish that sentence "this would be a great opportunity to _____" and then decide if this is the time for it.

This is a practice in discernment and it isn't easy. But if you begin to filter your requests through this lens, you'll also begin to know when to choose your absence on purpose so that you can be present to what matters most.

As you set goals, choose a word for the year, and plan your schedule — develop the habit of choosing your absence on purpose rather than having it be chosen for you by default.

Let's get quiet and listen to the heartbeat of our own lives rather than looking outside of ourselves for better, more important opportunities.

Choose your absence so that your presence will have more impact.

This will not be easy, especially if your fear of missing out is particularly strong. But if you keep your true values before you - what really matters - this will help you not to make decisions based on vanity - what will impress other people.

Your work is your work.
Your pace is your pace.
Your life is your life.
What a gift.

As is our custom around here, I'll close with a simple prayer as we move into another year.
Jesus, in you we have a friend who never requires a long road back.

We admit it often feels as though we've hustled our way far off the path, but the truth is you are never far away.

We don't have to retrace our hurried steps to find our way to you again.

We simply turn around, and there you are, walking right along with us in the weeds, finding your way with us in the dark, ready to be enough for us in every situation.

Be our courage as we discern the difference between our values and our vanity.

Relieve our decision fatigue in this new year, and be gentle with us, we pray.

Thanks for listening to Episode 19 of The Next Right Thing.

You guys it is so great to be back!

If you would like to connect beyond the podcast, there are several ways to do that.

I post almost daily to Instagram where you can find me @emilypfreeman.

To connect weekly stay right here and subscribe to the podcast if you haven't yet. And if you get a quick moment, leave a review. These are super helpful, and make it so that other people who are struggling to discover their next right thing can discover the podcast.

And once a month I send a letter to my innermost circle of readers - filled with first word news, the books I'm reading now, my favorite things list of the month, and a secret post you won't find anywhere else. There's a link right there in the show notes in whatever app you're listening in to. So you can click on that link to emilypfreeman.com/letter to get that monthly letter at the end of every month.

You can be sure that everything I write or speak about will always have one goal in mind: to help you create space for your soul to breathe so that you can discern your next right thing in love.

Hopefully, you know by now that we provide a transcript for each episode, so if you know someone who either can't hear or prefers reading to listening, you can download those transcripts at thenextrightthingpodcast.com. Just click on the episode number that you are looking for.

Some final thoughts from Kevin DeYoung in his book, *Crazy Busy*: "The biggest deception of our digital age may be the lie that says we can be omni-competent, omni-informed, and omni-present... We must choose our absence, our inability, and our ignorance—and choose wisely."

More advice on how to choose wisely so you can discern your next right thing in next week's episode - I'll see you then.