



Episode 23: Look for Arrows, Not Answers

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 24.

When I have a question, the first thing I want is an answer. Sometimes answers are fairly easy to come by. How do you make pizza? What should I wear today? Who can drive to piano practice?

But so often, the questions we have in life that give us trouble are the ones that aren't so linear. In my experience, these usually have to do with things like faith, vocation, and relationships.

When it comes to the simple questions in life, you have google. But when it comes to the deeper things of the spirit, the questions that linger for years and won't back down? You have The Next Right Thing Podcast. This is a place for anyone who values white space and thoughtful reflection but maybe you don't have a lot of time to cultivate that in your own life.

These are the kinds of things we talk about every Tuesday on The Next Right Thing. We take a little time on purpose to consider what's happening beneath the surface, the decisions that may be weighing us down and the questions we keep not having an answer for.

Today I want to tell you a story of a time in our life when not only did our questions not have answers, they actually seemed to birth more questions. The story today is a personal one but I share it now because it fits nicely with our theme for February where we're talking about discerning our next right thing in relationships. And I'm also sharing it simply because I have a feeling you'll find some of your own story here, too.

I didn't plan to walk out with a book that day. I only went inside the library because the mechanical book return slot outside was out of order. But once I was in there, it was only a few paces to the shelves so I took a minute to browse the spines in one of my favorite sections.

The title on a small book caught my eye immediately, maybe because it was stated in the form of a question and because it was a question that I had been carrying around for over a year by this point. The book was called *What Now?* Written by Ann Patchett. I picked it up and immediately knew I would check it out based on this quote in the *inside flap*:

She writes “What now? is not just a panic-stricken question tossed out into a *dark* unknown. What now? can also be our joy. It is a declaration of possibility, of promise, of chance. It acknowledges that our future is open, that we may well do more than anyone expected of us, that at every point in our development we are still striving to grow.”

The book is pocket-sized, small enough to read in one sitting. It’s actually a transcript of a commencement address that Ann Patchett gave at Sarah Lawrence College in 2006.

The title alone resonated deeply with me that day because John and I were living in our own what now? kind of moment, preparing to leave his position at our church of six years (after a total of twelve years in youth ministry) to . . . well, that’s just it.

We didn’t exactly know.

This was back in 2013 but I wanted to share it with you now because it was a time when we were looking for answers but what we got instead still rings true, even today.

Here’s what I know. God often gives a faint vision of things before they ever come to be.

It’s not a full form, more of a shadow, not focused or clear.

It doesn’t come with steps or money or sure-things but it does come with hope - and that’s what keeps you going in the fog.

As for us, we didn’t necessarily get the answers we thought we were looking for, but we did get arrows and so we followed them. This is a story of where they led.

The first arrow we had to follow was the arrow of grief. Not a favorite way to start a story, but there it is.

After John's Dad passed away during the summer of 2011, we knew things would never be the same for a lot of reasons, the main one being that John was broken open by grief.

After the funeral, John went back to work pretty much immediately, back to routine, back to his regularly scheduled life. But his soul lingered with the grief. It wasn't long before the disconnect between the pace of his life and the state of his soul began to show itself in the form of panic, sleepless nights, and intense fear.

That was the fall of 2011.

Because of his difficulties keeping pace with the demands of his highly relational job as a youth pastor, the church gifted him a three-month leave to catch his breath and simply be a person.

During those three months, he didn't check his email, he didn't meet with students, see co-workers, or parents. He completely disconnected from the demands of work. This, I know, is a rare gift. We are ever grateful to our former church for allowing him this time.

I share this part of the story with you just so that you'll know it's about more than quitting a job. It was about coming alive. This transition has been for us slow, deep, and far-reaching.

Another arrow we had been following actually quite some time even before his dad got sick was the arrow of desire. This, as it turns out, was surprisingly difficult for my husband.

After years in youth ministry, we began to notice the parts of the job that brought him life (relationships, small group discipleship, connecting with students on a soul level, teaching deeper life in Christ concepts) and the parts that wore him out (traveling, games, programs, hype).

I would try to initiate dream talk, you know the kind: If you could do anything regardless of income or location, what would it be?

Now listen, I was able to chatter away about moving to a big city or writing books together or traveling the country for a year with the kids, John was always more hesitant.

Even in our hypothetical conversation, he was unable to take pretend risk. His mind simply wouldn't allow his heart to dream.

Logic and limits often get in the way *of longing*.

It's important to be able to answer the question: What do you really want? I feel like I reference this one all the time, but Episode 14 walks you through why knowing what you want is so important.

It can also be scary, but it was only when John and I began to honestly explore the answer to that question in the presence of God that we started to get a hopeful vision for his vocation. But it didn't come the way we thought it would.

During those few months away from work, John traveled to attend a course in spiritual direction in Colorado Springs.

We had made these plans a long time ago, not knowing that when the time came to attend, he would be in a place where he desperately needed some clarity. We both thought his time there may bring some answers for his vocational direction.

What actually happened surprised us both. God met John during that short time away, turned some things over and woke some things up.

This awakening didn't come like a glorious sunrise or a blooming flower. Instead, it arrived more like a summer storm: dark clouds, thick air, rolling thunder.

But here is where we learned that desire often lives next door to grief inside the soul. Access the grief, you wake up the longing as well.

As a result, John came home more alive as a husband and friend than I had ever seen him before. I can't fully explain it though I'm obviously trying. There was still a long road of healing ahead for him, but now he seemed to have focus, not for his job, but for his family.

He wanted to be fully available as a husband and father in ways he had been previously closed off. Looking back, I remember hearing myself tell people in the months following his return that it wasn't so much that John had changed, more that he became more fully himself.

We thought he needed clarity, a good next step, a vision for whether or not he should stay in his current job as a youth pastor or move on to something else. Instead, all God offered was an arrow pointing from John to me and from me back to John.

We wanted to know the way and instead, God showed us each other.

For the first time in our marriage, we began to cultivate a respectful curiosity for our mutual desire as a couple. And the only thing we knew for sure is we were to move toward one another.

And that was it.

After many months of conversation, prayer, and counsel from trusted mentors and friends, we knew finally it was time to move on from youth ministry even though we didn't know what was next.

The first six months after he left his job were dedicated to rest, recovery, and home. It was during those six months that my book *A Million Little Ways* released so the timing was nice. He maintained our home rhythms while I worked, traveled some for the book, and began preliminary work on my next book.

We started to attend a small church, quietly getting to know a new community, re-adjusting to our new rhythm, re-learning how to sit together on Sunday morning which if you have been married to a pastor for any amount of time you know is a really big deal. We learned how to relate in a church where my husband wasn't a pastor.

Those six months turned into nearly a year before we actually had any clear indication of what the second half of John's career and ministry would look like. We walked through some hard days, some pretty hopeless what-are-we-even-doing kind of days where it seemed like the arrows led to nowhere.

But we kept coming back to the promise of God, knowing he wouldn't leave us alone.

It's been almost five years since that major what now? time of our lives. Looking back, it was maddening some days that we just wanted clear answers and instead, we got faint arrows - to desire, through grief, and finally to one another.

From where I sit today with John working quietly in the center of his giftedness as the director of a local non-profit where he offers soul care and discipleship for pastors, couples, and young men in our community. I know from this place it may be tempting to assume the road to get here was easy.

But if I could be so brave as to say it, the vocation is secondary for us. Yes, we have to make money. Yes, he wants to feel like he's contributing to society. Yes, he wanted to provide for his family - we both do.

But provision doesn't only mean money and I know in fact you may be able to testify to that. You know that even with enough money you may still not feel provided for. Because provision also looks like support, like communication, like turning toward the people you love rather than away from them. Provision looks like staying in the room together when it would be easier to walk out.

If you have a big question mark hanging out in your soul, maybe one that has to do with faith, vocation, or relationships, perhaps your next right thing is to take a break from your frantic search for answers and look around for the arrows instead.

Listen to your mutual desire as a family or a couple and refuse to be afraid of it.

Laugh.

Take a walk.

Make some plans.

Hold them loosely.

Take notes along the way.

And when you start to worry, don't do it behind a closed door.

Let someone in to sit with you without pushing them away.

Because next week, you may need to knock a door down for the sake of the ones you love and you'll want to remember what it feels like to be on the other side.

When you catch a tiny glimpse of the future, be sure not to smother it with your own agenda.

Let it breathe.

Let it grow at a healthy pace.

Admit it's both delightful and terrifying.

As you take your next right step today, trust that God won't let you miss your own future.

Father, we admit we want answers and there's nothing wrong with that.
But we can trip ourselves up when we hold clenched fists around our own agendas.
We are looking for a plan, but then you offer us your hand.
May it be enough today.

Grow in us hope where confusion used to live.
Grow in us courage where once there was fear.

While we admit our awareness of the vision of our future, keep us here in this moment for the people we love.
Thank you for never leaving us alone.

Thanks for listening to Episode 24 of The Next Right Thing.

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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.

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 the black button that says Download Transcripts.

And it's not the point of this episode, but if you are curious to learn more about John's local work in our community, you can find him at gracegreensboro.org.

Dallas Willard, in his book *Divine Conspiracy* says "the most important thing about you is not the things you achieve but the person you become."

If we really believed that, our decisions might not feel so heavy. That difficult "what now" time of our lives helped us to learn the truth behind those words, truth that quick answers would never have given us. That time of waiting and listening and not-knowing what's next helped us to become more fully ourselves, more connected as a couple, and less afraid of the next what now? season when it comes.

And it will come.

For when that happens, some final encouragement from Ann Patchett before we go. "Sometimes the circumstances at hand force us to be braver than we actually are, and so we knock on doors and ask for assistance. Sometimes not having any idea where we're going works out better than we could possibly have imagined."