



02: Do This Before Every Hard Decision

Do you have trouble making decisions? In particular, is there a decision you know you need to make but you keep putting it off? There could be many reasons why this particular decision is giving you trouble. But today I want to offer one question you can ask that could help you move forward.

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing, where we talk about the things that really matter but will rarely make the headlines. You're listening to Episode Two: Do this Before Every Hard Decision. If you are chronically hesitant to make a move or simply struggle from decision fatigue, this is a place for you to take a deep soul breath so that you can discern your next right thing in love.

It's the year 2000, and I'm working at a local high school as a sign language interpreter. It's morning and the bell rings to end the first class of the day. I gather up my bag just as a student I interpret for signs to me across the room that she'll meet me in the next class. Thankful for the few minutes I have, I make my way to the teacher's lounge for a quick phone call. My sister is in labor and I want to call Mom who's with her to find out how it's going. I listen as the phone rings once, twice, and then Mom picks up and tells me there's no baby yet but soon.

Just as I'm hanging up to rush to where I need to be, the principal's voice comes over the intercom announcing a tornado has been spotted in the area and everyone should stay put if they're already inside the building and should take cover if they're not. Instinctively, I turn to look out the window behind me, but instead of seeing the flagpole in the front lawn of the high school, I'm surprised to see my own reflection staring back. Outside, it's as dark as night, and it's not even lunchtime.

Later, we'll learn the storm that May morning wasn't necessarily impressive, according to the EF Scale. Wind gusts reaching just above 80 miles per hour, but it still comes in as the worst the city has seen in 20 years. The school day eventually continued. My drive home that afternoon was careful and filled with detours around downed trees and power lines. My apartment wasn't damaged and neither was my car, and my nephew born later that day is now 17.

There isn't any personal reason why I should still think about that storm very often but I do because on a trail less than a mile from my house is a tree with these words etched on it. "The May 25th, 2000 big storm." This tree in our neighborhood bears the mark of memory. I don't know how the storm affected the person who carved the wood that day, but it was enough for them to take the time to mark it. When I walk past this tree on the trail near our house, I think about that day still, how the principal had to make a choice for the sake of safety to keep the students inside and how the sky turned black and ominous and how we couldn't change the weather, only try to stay out of its way.

That's the way to handle yourself in a storm. Take cover, and wait for it to pass over. But it's possible to live like a storm is constantly brewing just outside the door even when the sky is clear and bright. It's possible to take cover even when there's nothing to take cover from except for a heavy idea or recurring thought in the night. This is especially true when we have a difficult decision to make. Sometimes we're afraid to move because we want to avoid an unwanted consequence rather than risk making a thoughtful decision to move toward life. This is when our lives become marked by hiding from the potential storms of loneliness, failure, isolation and visibility. Take cover or the storm might overtake you. Avoid danger. Sit under the banner of fear. Well, I've done that. I've lived that. Here's how it looked for me and the one question I've learned to ask before every hard decision.

Okay, so choosing what to do next is hard enough already, but add a thick layer of fear and doubt to all those daily decisions we have to make and you've got yourself a cupcake nobody wants eat. When my kids were little, I lived in fear a lot. I was afraid of them getting sick and it never ever ending. I was afraid of me getting sick and that never ending. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to take care of them. I was afraid I was going to make the wrong decisions about where we should live, how we should school, if I should take a job or not or if John should or not. When my first book came out and speaking opportunities started to roll in, I said yes maybe more than I wanted to because I was afraid of missing out on something. I also said no a few times because I was afraid I couldn't pull it off.

Fear works both ways. It keeps you from doing the things you might want to do, and it convinces you that you have to do things you don't want to do. But one decision for me in particular stands out in my mind and it came to me via email in the winter of 2011. That email was an invitation to travel as a writer with Compassion International to the Philippines to see the work that Compassion was doing on behalf of children and how they were working to help release them from poverty in Jesus's name. When the invitation came in my inbox, the first thing I did was tear up, of course. And the second thing I did was look up the Philippines on a map even though I was super sure that it was right off the coast of Haiti. Let me assure you, it is not.

I wish I could tell you that I jumped at the opportunity to see the work of Compassion in this third world country. I also wish I could tell you that my hesitancy to say yes was because of my life stage. We had three children who were seven and under. I wish I could tell you it was because of my work schedule. I was in fact in the middle of writing not one, but two books, because I was crazy. I wish I could tell you that I hesitated to say yes because of the dates that they coincided with my husband's busiest time of year at work, which they did. And all of those things were true and could have been good reasons for saying no, but those were not the reasons that I hesitated. When it came down to it, my reasons for wanting to say no to this trip to the Philippines were exactly precisely twofold.

Number one, I was afraid to fly. I had been on airplanes before. I really had, and I even flew to Spain once for a wedding so I had a passport. But a flight from the East coast to Europe is very different from the sheer amount of airplane travel it would take to get from the East coast of the United States of America to this little collection of islands in Southeast Asia. Well, let me just tell you, it was a lot of flying is what I'm saying. That was the first reason. The second was this: I was afraid I would get sick in a foreign country. Okay. Let me just break this down for you, people, who are not afraid of getting sick. Getting sick in general is already a fear I carried with me, especially at that time of my life. But getting sick in a foreign country, that was like the MVP of sick fears.

If fear of getting sick was an actor, getting sick in a foreign country would win all of the Academy Awards. Getting sick in a foreign country was the actual worst thing that could happen. And so I went around and around this decision. For one day, I pretended to say no in my mind. That didn't sit well. And then I pretended to say yes. And that didn't sit well. There was a tugging, a pulling, an unsettledness either way. So after two weeks of praying and discussing of seeking counsel, like you do, and general ridiculousness, I finally had a candid conversation with our trip leader, Sean Groves. And he said something to me on the phone that day that I have never forgotten. And it's the question that I ask myself now before every single hard decision.

“There may be a lot of reasons for you to say no to this trip,” he said. “But please don't let fear be one of them.” It was that one line he said that exposed the truth for me in that moment. I wasn't fully aware of it, but I was basing this decision on a storm I was imagining. In an attempt to avoid an unwanted consequence, I let fear push me around. And so I said yes. A side note to that yes, I didn't feel sure of it until after I made the commitment. I think I was subconsciously waiting for some sense of peace and clarity before I made my final decision. It never came. At least not on the front end. It was only after the decision was made that I felt confident in it. Now, when it comes to hard decisions, I don't wait two weeks to ask this question. I ask it at the first sign of hesitation. “Am I being led by love or pushed by fear?”

The answer to that question isn't always clear, but I continue to carry it with me into every hard decision because it's one thing to live through something hard to, for example, get sick in a foreign country and live to tell about it. It would be appropriate to mark that, to admit this was difficult, but we survived it. It's another thing altogether though to create a storm in our head and then make our decisions based on a possible scenario that hasn't even happened. This will probably always be something I need to walk through, making decisions out of love rather than from fear. The truth is I can't prevent storms from coming, but I can decide not to invent my own. Maybe it's good to mark our storms like the tree writer did. When this happened, it was bad and we lived through it. But I want to let go of the habit of making them. If you are facing down a big decision in your life, perhaps your next right thing is to ask yourself the question, “In this situation, in this decision, am I being led by love or pushed by fear?”

In the words of Sean Groves, there might be a lot of good reasons not to do something, or I'll add, to do something. But don't let fear be one of them. And so we turn our eyes to the one who walks with us and lives within us unbound by time or place or gravity. You go ahead of us into an unknown future. You walk toward us with love in your eyes. You stand beside us when we find ourselves in unsure places. You sit next to us in silence and enjoy. You watch behind us to protect our minds from regret. You live within us and lead from a quiet place.

When you speak with gentleness, may we not ignore you. When you direct with nudges, may we move with ease. When you declare your love for us, may we refuse to squirm away. When you offer good gifts, may we receive them with gratitude. When you delay the answers, may we wait with hope. We resist the urge to sprint ahead and hurry or lag behind in fear. Let us keep company with you at a walking pace, moving forward together one step at a time.

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visit the nextrightthingpodcast.com, where I'll share resources mentioned, a transcript of today's episode and other notes that might be helpful. You can find me on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman) and emilypfreeman.com. As always, I hope our time together has helped to create a little more space for your soul to breathe so that you can discern your next right thing. If this episode has been helpful for you, go ahead and subscribe so you won't miss the next one and be sure to leave a review so others can find their way too.

So was saying yes to that trip the right decision for me to make? how do we know when to say yes and when to say no? Well, that's coming up on the next episode of the Next Right Thing. Thanks for listening.