



05: Offer Your Work with Hope

When it comes to the work we do every day, it can be easy to dismiss it as ordinary, regular, or even unimportant, especially when we consider all the pain and heartbreak in the world around us. When we're confronted with overwhelming need, how are we to decide what our role is in the midst of it? What is our next right thing?

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode five, Offer Your Work with Hope. If this is your first time listening in, this is a podcast for the second guessers, the chronically hesitant, or anyone who suffers from decision fatigue. Out of the thousands of decisions you make every day, chances are a few of them threaten to keep you up at night. If you're in a season of transition, waiting, general fogginess, or if you feel overwhelmed with all the needs in the world, and aren't sure what to do in the midst of it, you're in the right place.

At the end of our few minutes together, I hope to offer a bit of clarity when it comes to your unique role in the world. That's why I've created something. It's a mini version of this podcast for you to listen to every single day in September. You heard that right. I've made a daily audio series to help you set your mind before you start your work. It's short, it's simple, and you can start with day one as early as right now. I'll tell you more about what that is and how to get it at the end of this episode.

Every week, it seems the world gets a little more crazy. In a colorful mix of joy and grief, just two weeks ago, here in the United States, we started the week with a total solar eclipse and ended it with Hurricane Harvey, making landfall on the Gulf Coast. Spinning for days and leaving behind record rainfall, devastating floods, and full out heartbreak.

Meanwhile, there are wars and uncertainties all around the world. Loved ones are still being deployed overseas. Racial tension is on the rise in our own communities and the social, spiritual and physical needs of our neighbors keep on growing.

When we dare to look up from our own agendas and catch a glimpse of the pain around us, doing the next right thing might not seem like enough. How can we be content with one small next step, when it seems so much more is needed, especially now? It's an important question to ask ourselves. And as I've considered that question for years now, I'm convinced the answer is found closer to home than it may seem at first. Hidden within the sacred curves of our soul, where our lives are United with the life of Christ. But first, a story.

Her email came on a Tuesday in response to a post I wrote on my blog about writing and about being

open to what we each have to offer. She was kind, she was normal. She spoke of her college degree, her marriage after she graduated, her beautiful children and her full life. She spoke of her responsibilities and her lack of time. And then in the PS, she spoke of desire. “I have always wanted to write again,” she said, “but I haven’t much since childhood. Every time a friend writes something, I wish I were doing that.”

I wrote her back and simply asked what was keeping her from writing. Her honest answer is one I haven’t been able to forget. I can quote it word for word from memory. “This season of life won’t necessarily afford me the pleasure of indulging in my wildest dreams.” Those words struck me in that moment. First, because I understood where she was coming from. But something else happened in me as I read her words in that email. I felt a mix of emotions that took me awhile to figure out. On the one hand, I had deep compassion towards her, but I also had some questions because it was as if she was saying to me, “Look, I’m a grownup, now. I don’t have the time or the luxury to consider what I most long for or what I uniquely have to offer.”

She used the phrase, wildest dream, to describe her idea of writing. Wild dreams are usually reserved for things that will probably never happen, like taking a trip to the moon or winning an Oscar, but writing as a wild dream, that’s something to pay attention to. I love her answer because she put into words what so many people feel. There is a real pole between exploring those things that make us come alive, while at the same time being present to our responsibilities and our life stages.

But why do we so often assume that pursuing those things we want to pursue can only be done at the expense of our responsibilities. That may sometimes be true, but it isn’t automatically true. Why can’t we recognize and embrace the connection between the kind of art we long to make and the reality of our truest identity? What if you desire to do a particular thing, because God created you in a particular way. Not to tease you or to make you miserable, but to actually mold you into becoming more like him, for his glory and the benefit of others. Could it be possible that the thing you most long for, the thing you notice and think about and wish you could do, is the thing you were actually made for and are being equipped to do. Could it also be possible that somewhere along the way, you got the message that to follow desire would be selfish when really it would be the opposite.

And when terrible things happen in the world, you are simply asked to wake up to that desire and do the next right thing and love. Could it be possible that there is not just one way you are made to move into this world, but a million little ways that God has made you to declare his glory in the world? Because, I don’t know when to keep my big nose out of other people’s business, when it comes to stuff like this, I asked this reader, some of those questions. Her answer, “It could be possible.”

One of the biggest obstacles we face when it comes to doing creative work is our own idea about it. First, we make it fancy and second, we make it too hard. We make it so mysterious and we think of it as something that is outside of us. We make it such a big deal. In one way, I guess it is but if you keep it there, it will continue to be too big to touch. You fear you’ll wreck it all up if you dare to reach for it. So you leave it up there in the clouds, sparkling just out of your reach. And it looks real pretty and you cower beneath it as if it were something too important for you to handle.

But you know what we call those things, that are placed up so high, that we have to bow down low beneath them? We call them idols and in a way, I’m sure we don’t intend. Denying the art and the work we feel called to deep down, maybe the very thing that opens the door to making the work, the God, rather

than God himself. We revere and respect the artistic potential of a dream rather than recognizing God as the creator who simply gives the gift of co-creation to us.

The woman who sent that email spoke of her desire to write. But as a writer myself, I have to say that her words were about more than just the act of writing. She was talking about a desire to express herself fully as herself and something deep within her, since that writing played a part. The truth is you could replace that word writing with any number of things.

When I speak of desire here, it isn't merely a desire to pursue a particular job or hobby a project or vocation. It could be part of that, but that's not the whole, I'm speaking of a desire running deeper than that. It's a longing for truth, for love, for God and to honestly relate with others from the depths of who we most fully are. But what often happens is when we get a hint of that longing and that desire, instead of embracing it, we often run from it.

Is desire tucked away, somewhere inside you, hidden in the shadows of your soul? Is there something you have in mind that you've been putting off for weeks, months, years? Could it carry important hints about your design? Is there something you've been wanting to try in your classroom or with your coworkers or in that project you've been working on, but you are so afraid it might not work that you keep denying it, putting it off and pushing it away.

What if you decided to stop making it a big thing and just explored it already? What if exploring it could help you become more fully yourself, no matter the outcome. What if that insight, perspective, skill or burden you have, has been given to you by God so that you could give it away to someone else? And that is where the hope of the Gospel becomes real. Because when we see the neediness of a broken world, generally one of two things will happen. It will either wake us up, or it will shut us down.

This simple and honest email exchange with the woman who had the heart of a writer is a small and somewhat imperfect example of how we are used to shutting down when it comes to desire. If that is our practice, how much more than, will we want to shut down when it comes to pain and suffering. Listen to the words of Henri Nouwen in his book *Here and Now*.

“The more I think about the human suffering in our world and my desire to offer a healing response, the more I realize how crucial it is to not allow myself to become paralyzed by feelings of impotence and guilt. More important than ever, it is to be very faithful to my vocation. To do well, the few things I am called to do and hold onto the joy and peace they bring me. I must resist the temptation to let the forces of darkness, pull me into despair and make me one more of their many victims.”

Henri Nouwen dared to say that in the face of human suffering, it is more important than ever to be faithful to our vocation, to our unique offerings. If I may use a word many of you might not associate with your own work, it's more important than ever to make art.

We don't turn our heads and hearts away from the suffering. Instead, we turn towards it in the presence of Christ. We dare to listen to our own desire and we take the next step that makes sense. We offer what we hold in our hands. We grieve when it all gets to be too much, but we also swallow down joy in big breathless gulps, because that is the state of things. We carry the presence of Christ with us, wherever we go, because where is compassion found, if not in our eyes, our hands, our embrace? An artist is simply

anyone who's brave enough to move towards what makes her come alive.

And whatever comes out as a result of that, be it a piece of writing, a painting, a song, a warm meal, a thoughtful conversation, a humble donation, a listening ear, well, these are simply the evidence that art has happened. Proof of people willing to bear God's image in the world.

No matter the art, be it painting, dancing, mothering, writing, counseling, teaching, or design, we grieve when we can't seem to find our voice, our place or our offerings. Joy and discouragement live too close in our hearts and we can't reconcile our desire with our constant disappointment. We confess all the ways we hold on to the wrong things and we admit that the wrong things are holding onto us. Forgive us for forgetting that we don't just make art, but we are art and you, the true artist, you are a finisher and you always carry out your work until it is complete. Especially the work you begin in us, the invisible kind.

Rather than trying to do big things for the world, may we be willing to do our own thing well and present it as an offering. Like the young boy on the breezy hillside next to the sea, may we remember our job is to simply offer our small lunch to you. Your job is to feed 5,000 people. Show us what it means to keep company with you in the work we do every day.

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

After years of writing on the internet about creativity, after publishing a book about living life as art, and after nearly two years of leading an online membership site for writers, one thing I know for sure is that when it comes to creative work, we are the most professional self doubters, I know. We want to move into the pain of the world as people who are fully alive, but as lovely as that sounds, it also feels terrifying. What if it isn't enough?

Well, I've created something to help you set your mind before you start your work. It's a 20 day audio devotional series called The Quiet Collection and it's available now for a limited time. It's for you, if you want to approach your work with new hope, fresh eyes, and to find some relief from the creative anxiety that our work sometimes can cause. What exactly is The Quiet collection? Well, if you enjoy this podcast, then think of The Quiet Collection as a mini version, you'll receive every day in September. For 20 days, you'll receive a three to five minute audio recording where I'll read a small portion of scripture, share a reflection and a prayer I wrote to help you set your mind before you start your work.

Hopefully you already know this, but everything I do has one singular goal to help create space for your soul to breathe so you can discern your next right thing in love. That means the tone, the pace and the music for the collection have all been carefully curated to help you set a simple intention each day before you begin your work, all for less than a dollar a day. If you want to have a sane September, simply visit thenextrightthingpodcast.com to learn more about this edition of The Quiet Collection. It will only be available for about a week, so now's the time to come on over and check it out at thenextrightthingpodcast.com.

In closing, I'll share a few words from Janice Elsheimer, in her book *The Creative Call*. Our gifts are not from God to us, but from God through us to the world.