



124: Reimagine Your Work Day

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to *The Next Right Thing*. You're listening to episode 124.

This is a podcast about making decisions but also 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 are in the right place. I'll bring you a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step. Today I'm revisiting a topic that we've talked about here before, but with a little bit of a new spin in light of the world having changed and everything. This will, I hope, be especially helpful if before the pandemic you were a person who worked from home and now you have to find new ways to do that thing you've always done. So listen in.

You know how at the end of the year, those of us who are on Instagram share our top nine of the year? That's the top nine photos that got the most likes and listen, I'm here for all of it. I love seeing people's top nines. I just love it. And I love discovering what my top nine are.

I think it's really fun and I also think it's kind of fascinating, but in the spirit of doing what I want, I also like to post two versions of my top nine. The first the top nine according to the rules by the most liked, and then the top nine according to myself, which just means that the nine photos that I like the most from my own feed. Well in the world of podcasting, there isn't really an equivalent of the Instagram top nine I guess, but we can gauge at least in part which episodes are listener favorites maybe by the number of downloads they receive.

For example, I can tell you the most downloaded episode of all time on the podcast is no surprise. It's the first episode, episode one Become a Soul Minimalist. In some ways, that's not necessarily a measure of favorite. That's just a measure of the fact that it's the very first episode. It's been around the longest, and a lot of people like to get a feel for a podcast by listening to how it starts.

The second most downloaded episode is episode 88, that's called Come Away For A While, and it was about the importance of sabbaticals and how we confuse them with other kinds of "rest." It could be the second most downloaded because it was a favorite, but more likely it's because it's the last episode that I recorded before I actually took a sabbatical and so for a while, a couple of weeks, it was the newest episode that I had, so when people came to the podcast, that was the latest episode.

Another highly downloaded episode is episode 84, A Beginner's Guide to Self-Reflection, which by the

way, makes me eternally happy because making reflection lists is one of my most favorite things to do. So talking with you about doing them is equally as satisfying.

Now, I do love all three of those episodes, but they're not necessarily my favorites. One of my favorite episodes was one where I shared about how I created theme days for my work and how they saved my life during some of the busiest years of my life. One thing that continues to be a challenge for me personally is like many of you, my work responsibilities don't fall under the same umbrella, and this is true for a lot of authors or people who work from home or entrepreneurs who wear lots of different hats. I've heard this story over and over. That means when I sit down to work, there are many different types of tasks that I could tackle.

This could apply to you, like I said, no matter what your job is, but also it could be whether it's a job that you're getting paid, for or it could just be a creative work that you hope to maybe one day be paid for, or that you're just really highly motivated to do. It could be how you feel if you have a ministry that you volunteer for or even in certain areas of running your household.

As I tried to manage the ever-growing to do lists that I had, switching between tasks for these different areas of my work got me nowhere and having to decide every single day what am I going to work on today. And the list was impossibly long, and I found that the options lead to discouragement and decision fatigue. I tried to prioritize for awhile based on importance or urgency, but that never seemed to work because too many tasks felt equally important depending on the day and my mood.

Well, that's when I started using theme days for my work. And the way I did that was by dividing up my week based on different themes or categories. At that time, my theme days were this podcast, my work for hope*writers, school reading, paper writing, and some general admin stuff. And like I said, that decision saved my life at the time. But life has changed.

So today, I'm revisiting that idea of theme days with a pandemical adjustment, or if you're listening to this from the future and that global pandemic is just something only your parents talk about that happened way back in 2020, well, this still could be for you if you're finding your life rhythm has changed drastically, but your work expectations have remained the same.

I'm so grateful that I have a job, and I'm grateful that it's one I've always been able to do from home and I can continue to do it from home, but things have not slowed down. If anything, they've ramped up. How can we continue to do our work with some sanity when everything is different?

See if you can relate to this. As I record this, it's Monday. My plan is to work for a few hours to finish this episode because Mondays are my podcast days as everyone in my real life knows and many of you know that as well. I've worked with theme days for a few years now, which means like I said, every day of the week is assigned a particular theme, so finishing the podcast was the plan for today.

PS. I know I've talked about this a little bit, but if you do want more about theme days in general, that episode that I recorded dedicated to that is episode 73.

Anyway, so today's Monday, and it's podcast day, and that was my plan to finish the episode by the end of

the day. But instead by lunchtime, I'm a quarter of the way through 10 different tasks, moving each one an inch at a time, doing everything, getting nowhere.

I'm halfway through writing a caption for an Instagram post. I'm in the middle of responding to three different Voxer conversations. I have a book next to me that I just put down, and I only read one half of one chapter. Five minutes ago, I was reading through applications for some hope writer positions that we're hiring for. P.S. Applications are closed. Don't @ or email me, please and thank you.

And just before I started to record the intro to this episode, I read a text from my sister with a link to a video that took me down a 10-minute rabbit hole. Today, I've also Googled the phrases "storm damage in North Carolina," "TV shows that had been canceled," "Boris Johnson hospital," and "Meghan Markle" because, of course, I did.

These things are not specific to the times right now, but they are evidence that I am even more easily distracted these days, and maybe you are too.

The bottom line I've discovered is that giving myself a theme for the whole day is just unrealistic for me right now. It's too broad of a time limit without enough details. At the end of the day, I feel like I did a lot of stuff but finished nothing. I've come to accept that it isn't only our plans for the future that needs some serious adjustment. It's also our plans for today.

I'm still using the theme concept, and I might return to the old way of doing it at some point, but right now, instead of applying it to a workday, I'm applying it to a work session. Some days I get to have several work sessions in maybe 20 to 40 to 60 minute blocks. Other days there's only one good one. Some days, there's not a good one at all. But this can be especially helpful if you have a lot of people, especially small children living in your house, and it's much more manageable to tell your family that you're going to disappear for a 20, 40, or 60 minute work session and then lock yourself in your bedroom than it is to say that you're taking the day to work.

Whether I'm able to work all day or for only a portion of a part of a day, here are five things that are helping me right now.

#1. Get clear on the task.

I'm not working on my website. I'm writing an about page. I'm not reading email. I'm responding to five messages and clearing them out. One of our decision-making practices that we talked about in episode 121 was that if you can't put your decision into a clear sentence, then you won't be able to make a clear decision. The sentence forces you to hold just one decision at a time. Nothing brings on frustration overwhelm more quickly than when you're trying to decide two things at once. If you can't state clearly what the decision is, then don't try to make the decision until you can.

Well, the same goes for a work session. Depending on your living situation, you may not get many of these during the week. So it's important to be clear on the front end what you want to accomplish when you have a work session. If you can't state what the task is when you sit down to work, chances are you'll be more prone to distraction, and instead of sending those five emails, you'll end up reading a lot about what Meghan Markle is up to these days. So that's get clear on the task.

#2. Ready your workspace.

Whether you have an actual home office with a door, hallelujah. Or if your workspace is your kitchen table or your side of the bed, ready it by clearing and tending. First, clear, clear off that workspace. That does not mean reorganize your desk, but if there's a bunch of stuff on your desk, just put it on the floor. Just get it outta sight. You can always place it back on your desk when your work session is over.

And nothing is lost. That's the clearing part. This works too. If you're locked in your bedroom on your bed, make that bed. Clear the clutter that you can see. Face the window. Anything to just get rid of that visual clutter.

Next, it helps me to tend the space a bit and that's just simply before I sit down to do the task at hand, I light a candle, open the window above my desk or put on my writing playlist, something small that feels a little extra. This week I ordered a new candle from Target. It's blood orange if you must know, and when it came in the mail, it made me so happy because it's just a little something to set the tone for my work session.

#3. Apply a time limit.

This is just another way to say, set a timer, yall. The experts say that our brains can concentrate on one task for about 20 minutes before losing focus. You may know about that little tomato timer. What is it? Pomodoro. I never say that right. Pomodoro method. I don't necessarily think there's a rule on how long a work session can go, but I do think there's something to that 20-25 minute space for us to be able to sit down, concentrate and then take a quick break. But the most important thing is that you pick a time and stick with it. Apply a time limit, and I always just use the timer on my iPhone.

#4. Carry only one task.

This is where I personally get into the most trouble, which is why I'm kind of making one point twice. The first point was: get clear on the task. That refers to before you get started, know what you want to work on, but this one is once you're started, carrying it through as though it's just one single task.

Jason Fitzpatrick calls it single-tasking in a post for LifeHacker. By the way, the site's tagline that he wrote that on LifeHacker is "Do everything better," which I can get behind that. Single tasking is the "eat healthy and exercise of productivity." It's so obvious. It feels dumb to say it, but then I continue not to do it. It's hard. Instead, I suffer from open tabs syndrome, trying to make tiny progress on lots of things instead of lots of progress on one thing, carry only one task.

#5. End the session well.

This is the second hardest part for me, or maybe it's the first hardest part, and the other one is the second hardest part, but here's the point. It's hard for me to end, especially these days. It's not that I'll work all day long, it's just that it kind of fizzles out at the end of the day when I get tired and there isn't a clear end to work. The timer will help. Single-tasking will help, but this is still something I have to be really mindful of.

Even if the task isn't finished or didn't turn out exactly as I hoped, it's important to end the session anyway. If I can start another one, I will, usually with a little bit of a break in between. But these days it's easy to slip into always being attentive to the work but never making progress on the work. This just adds to the fog in the waiting room.

Honor your limits of which there may be many, and maybe that's the most important part to remember. We're not robots, and sometimes the best thing we can do for productivity is to extend grace for ourselves, our coworkers, our families, and our outcomes.

In fact, as a reminder, all five of these tips spell out grace, if you write them down.

- G - Get clear on the task.
- R - Ready your workspace.
- A - Apply a time limit.
- C - Carry only one task.
- E - End that session well.

The days may be different now, but the work continues. We need you to find a way to do your good work, so that we can be inspired, so that we can laugh, so that we can learn, remember, believe and link arms together.

And when a day goes seven kinds of sideways and you don't even get a minute of work done, there is grace enough for you to start again tomorrow. And the same way we're parenting our children, telling them it's going to be okay, we have to parent ourselves, too. And in that, we're to be kind, we're to extend grace. Maybe we'll keep a light heart and hopeful posture as we continue to do just our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 124 of *The Next Right Thing*.

I hope this simple practice of thinking in work sessions instead of workdays can be just one more run on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true, this is a podcast about making. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

If you're craving even more guidance on how to create some rhythm in your days. I already mentioned episode 73 design a rhythm of work, but you might also enjoy episode 90 Start With This Simple Rhythm, which is more specifically about creating a morning routine of prayer, reading and writing.

Well, as always, you can find me @emilypfreeman or at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also download a transcript of this and every episode of the podcast. Just click Podcast in the top navigation.

Well, with all this talk of work and productivity, let's remember the grace and beauty that makes up the air around us as we do our good work. So here's a reminder from Madeleine L'Engle in her beautiful book *Walking on Water*, chapter three.

She writes, "The marvelous thing is that this holiness is nothing we can earn. We don't become holy by acquiring merit badges and brownie points. It has nothing to do with virtue or job descriptions or morality. It is nothing we can do in this do-it-yourself world. It is gift, sheer gift, waiting there to be recognized and received. We do not have to be qualified to be whole or healed."

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.

The Next Right Thing with Emily P. Freeman