



## 132: Why is Decision-Making So Hard?

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 132.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

You may have heard me tell the story before about the beginning of this podcast back in 2017, and how I thought maybe I had about eight episodes in me. I had just a few ideas about the potentially transformative power that could be found in the process of decision making and how simply doing the next right thing could provide so much relief.

Now, I would say the work of discernment and decision making is the foundation of everything I do. And I keep uncovering more angles, more insights, and more voices from which to learn. Since I see this as part of my job to bring you short episodes every week to help you discern your next right thing, just know I won't be able to geek all the way out as much as I want to today in an attempt to keep this somewhat bite-sized, but after this episode, I've realized at least more books I want to read on decision making and more thoughts I want to think through about the whole process, too. So hold onto your hats, kids, and listen in.

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After co-leading the Literary London trip with Tsh Oxenreider last summer, I stayed in the city after our guests had all departed and I waited for the arrival of my family who was going to be joining me for a second week in London before we headed home together. We decided to stay in the small town of Windsor, just west of the city. And I had a full 24 hours in our rental house alone before their plane was scheduled to arrive at Heathrow the next day.

I spent that day becoming familiar with the streets of Windsor as best I could before they arrived, which by the way, turned out to be fairly simple because the town's not very big. I was delighted to discover the long walk leading up to Windsor Castle was just a block away from our house. Fun fact: We were there in Windsor the same week Meghan and Harry's baby Archie was christened at Windsor Castle. And we spent hours standing outside with onlookers, even though the ceremony was private and the entrances were private. And we had zero chance of seeing a single member of the royal family. Still, we were there.

Anyway, after about an hour or so of exploring, I ended up at the grocery store to stock the fridge with

some essentials before the family arrived. And though I'd been in the English grocery store a few times just that past week, it struck me now that I was alone, how much smaller everything was here. The milk carton and the juice container are half the size as they in the U.S. The small bag of new potatoes, a mesh bag of four lemons instead of eight. Not only were the portions smaller, so were the selections. Instead of an entire aisle of juice, there were only a few shelves, plenty to choose from, but not quite as overwhelming as the grocery stores I'm used to.

Here in the U.S. , we tend to visit the store weekly, or maybe even every 10 days. From what I hear in Europe, they're more apt to shop a little every day, so there's really no need to buy in bulk and stock up. And that means there's less need for refrigeration. Those of you who live in Europe, I'm sure you have a lot of things you could teach me about this.

Once my family arrived in Windsor, we took the kids to the grocery store together. Less because we had things we needed to buy, and more just as a cultural experiment, look how differently they do things here. Look at the brand names that aren't familiar, look at the packaging and the dirty looks that we get when we forget to bring our own canvas bag. Unless you get the impression that I think that we were experiencing some kind of unique and extreme cross-cultural shock, I do realize that we were at a grocery store in Windsor – a tourist-heavy little town in England, a country whose language we share. As cross cultural experiences go, this one was fairly tame, but still I was struck by the reduced number of choices that we had at the grocery store.

In an article for the Los Angeles Times, Evan Kleiman wrote about how surprising it was to her when she first started traveling to Europe to find that the average refrigerator there was about the size of a beverage fridge that you would find in a U.S. dorm room.

“What struck me,” she writes, “was the frugal way people lived that allowed that tiny fridge to be enough. It was a kind of force deficiency that led to very little waste. Instead of weekly trips to the supermarket, grocery shopping was an activity folded into the rhythm of daily life.”

Well, as we all know, shopping habits aren't the only differences between cultures around the world. Looking a bit deeper, if you'll allow me to analyze my grocery shopping experiences, this reduced number of choice was for me, cause for both relief and a little bit of concern. Relief because less choice meant less decision fatigue, but concern and not, you know, life or death concern, but concerned none the less because somewhere in my bones, I carry this belief that the more options we have, the better off we are. And while reducing the options may make the choice a bit less confusing, does that mean I'm somehow missing out?

Here's where I'm going with this, how we view choice is not universal.

In the United States, we place a high value on our independence, on our ability to choose for ourselves and to have things the way we want them when we want them. And while I know I'm speaking in broad strokes, and this does not necessarily every single U.S. citizen completely, it does in many ways, describe us as a whole. But this is not necessarily a shared value around the world.

In fact, if you're interested in learning more about that, I recommend you watch author Sheena Iyengar TED Talk called *The Art of Choosing* where she talks about her studies of how we make choices and

how we feel about the choices that we make. By the way, she wrote a book with the same title, *The Art of Choosing*.

For the sake of our short conversation here, I just want to point out two quotes, and then, I'll issue an invitation to pull it all together for us, as we seek to discern our next right thing this week, bearing in mind that though we have listeners from 174 countries around the world, the vast majority of listeners to this podcast live in the United States. So I will let you confront your own cultural assumptions about choice, but I'm speaking from the perspective of a U.S. citizen as are the two authors that I'm quoting here, but I'm carrying this question: Why is it so hard to make decisions?

The first quote is from Sheena Iyengar herself who says this in her TED Talk, "For modern Americans who are exposed to more options and more ads associated with options than anyone else in the world, choice is just as much about who they are as it is about what the product is. Combine this with the assumption that more choices are always better, and you have a group of people for whom every little difference matters. And so every choice matters."

That's the first quote that was Sheena Iyengar in her TED Global Talk in 2010.

The second quote is from Amy, Sandra Choi. She's the cofounder of Mashup Americans and the author of an article that she wrote for TED called *How cultures around the world make decisions*. And in it, she says this, "In the U.S., the overriding perception is there anything you do out of allegiance to tradition and social expectation is inauthentic and not you. Because the real you is the choices you make."

Alright. So putting those two quotes together, if we agree with them, then we come to three conclusions about how we view decisions.

The more options, the better.

Every single detail of those options is important.

The choices we make are directly correlated to the people we are.

That means that as Americans, and I'll specify United States of Americans, we want the option and the freedom to choose from every possibility. And we put the pressure on ourselves to select one unique and authentic choice that reflects our identity. We want a room full of choice, and we want to walk out of that room with one perfect selection that will reveal who we most deeply are.

No wonder we're anxious and exhausted suffering from chronic hesitation and decision fatigue. We need a new system. The kingdom of God provides it for us. And it's important to remember the tension we're always carrying around between faith and doubt, love and fear, surrender and control.

Fathers Michael Sparough and Tim Hipskind teach workshops on a process of discernment developed by Saint Ignatius over 500 years ago. In their book called *What's Your Decision*, they write these words, "Our decisions matter, and we are truly free to make them. The restless desire lurking in the background of decision making is the desire to have it all. It's hard to choose because making a decision means saying no, as much as it means saying yes. We hate to say no to ourselves. Every important decision involves roads not taken, possibilities forever unexplored, work that we will never do, people who will not be part of our lives."

That's the end of that quote. If we think the more choice, the better, and we think our choices need to accurately reflect our authenticity and our autonomy, and we think God has one idea for us. And we have to figure out the best idea out of infinite choices, we are missing the point. The point is union with God, always and forever, this is the point.

In our relationship conflict, our community service, our social justice, our daily chores, in our grand plans, our lofty dreams, our big ideas and our next right thing, the purpose and goal is not to make a perfect decision or avoid mistakes. The purpose and goal is to respond to the loving invitation of the spirit of God, who is always moving, mothering, and bring us near to God's heart.

Whether you stand in a room filled with endless potential or find yourself forced to choose between just two terrible options, the pressure is off. You are seen and held. You are loved and wanted. One choice today doesn't determine who you are forever. You are capable of discerning what's best, of hearing God's voice, and of doing your next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 132 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of doing the next right thing can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives as always.

You can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where we always provide a transcript for every episode, either for you, if you prefer reading to listening, but also for our deaf and hard of hearing friends who would otherwise not have access to an audio offering.

In closing, a reminder that God cares about our decisions in a modern paraphrase from Ignatius himself.

God who loves us, creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and honor, and service of the God of our life. All the things in this world are also created because of God's love and they become a context of gifts presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.

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