



145: When You're Afraid: Start With Your Senses

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 145. 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.

We're in the middle of a short series here on the podcast, all about starting with your senses. And let me tell you, this topic is right on time for me. I've so enjoyed this simple practice of getting out of my head and into my body by paying attention to what I see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. And our last episode, I shared some simple ways to do that.

If you're feeling stuck, take a walk, take a shower and eat a meal. Sounds like things a mama would say, don't they? Well in the spirit of continuing to offer comforting words in times of struggle, today's episode is especially for you. If you're feeling afraid before we get into it, I'd like to tell you about our episode sponsor [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). With an interactive online platform and an AncestryDNA kit, you can take a break from 2020 and step back in time to discover your family's history and what makes you well you with Ancestry's billions of records and millions of family trees. You're sure to find something new about your family that you didn't know before. Through following my hints on my family tree, it's allowed me to trace family members all the way back to the 1600s. Learning their names and birthplaces has sparked fascinating conversation for my whole family. And I found myself imagining what our family experienced, what their lives were like and what inspired them to make their way around the world. It's even given me a profound sense of appreciation for my family's path from Ireland to Pennsylvania, Indiana, and now North Carolina. AncestryDNA provides historical details that can bring unique family stories to life. Start exploring your family story today. Visit [ancestry.com/nexrightthing](https://www.ancestry.com/nexrightthing), to get your AncestryDNA kit and start your free trial. That's [ancestry.com/nexrightthing](https://www.ancestry.com/nexrightthing). Now onto today's episode. Listen in.

In my final year of college, all of my classes were directly related with my major, which as you can imagine, as it is for most college seniors, this is one of the most exciting times in the life of a student. Finally, we can focus solely on learning what we're most interested in. For me as a 20, 21-year-old, this was educational interpreting for the deaf. I was training to become a sign language interpreter in a mainstream public school classroom, which is what I did for several years after graduation.

Part of our training as sign language interpreters was to not only learn American sign language, but to

also learn about deaf culture as well as to become empathetic members of the deaf and hard of hearing community. Interpreters are expected to abide by a code of ethics to keep confidentiality and to remain in the role of interpreting one language into another. But as educational interpreters, our job was somewhat unique in that we weren't simply showing up for a random appointment for a client that we may never see again. Instead, we would be assigned to a deaf student for an entire school year, possibly for several years in a row showing up to every class, interpreting lectures, class projects, pep rallies, fire drills, and morning announcements. Not to mention the fact that our clients are not fully grown humans, but deaf students who were still developing their sense of self, still learning how to navigate through an advocate for themselves in a hearing world.

One exercise, in particular, I remember well is my teacher instructed us to get out a sheet of paper. And for the next two minutes, we were to write down everything we heard in the classroom. She set a timer and the room went quiet as we put our heads down and began to write. At first, I didn't think I would have much to write down in an empty room, but as instructed, I started to move my pen and I realized immediately there were actually a lot of sounds happening in what would typically we would call a quiet room.

There was the sound of pens and pencils moving across loose leaf paper, the footsteps of another professor in the hallway, the traffic on the street outside and three floors below, the mindless foot tapping of a student, two seats over, an AC unit slowly roaring to life, a pencil dropping to the floor, the scratch of metal on linoleum as the owner moved her chair to pick it up, the tick of the clock, the zip of a bag, a siren in the distance, a sneeze.

When the timer went off, I was still writing down sounds I could hear. And I was shocked to see that I'd nearly filled the page. And that's when our teacher said this, everything you wrote down in those two minutes, those are things a deaf student will miss in the classroom. And then she went on to tell us that this could be one thing we could do for our students once we get real jobs as sign language interpreters in the classroom setting. While the students take a test and the room is quiet, we could make it a regular practice to write down everything we hear. And then when the test is over, hand them the sheet of paper, so they could read all the sounds happening around them. It was a practice of inclusivity, of bringing them into the present moment that everyone else in the room had just experienced, but maybe they didn't even realize it.

As hearing people, our brains categorized sound as important and unimportant, like foreground and background noise. It's like we have a built-in stereo system that amplifies what we need to hear and then disregards everything extra. Because of that, perhaps we aren't aware of, or don't consider all the contexts that we're constantly surrounded by and take our cues from, even when we don't realize it.

Small seemingly insignificant sounds that we tend to tune out, might actually be telling a background story and providing meaning for us that we wouldn't be able to make sense of if we couldn't hear them.

In a similar way, fear can cause us to lose our context as well. We can become hyperfocused on certain cues and then ignore other ones. Now, fear is not really a bad thing. Not always and not only. Fear can be our friend because it helps us to survive by telling us to avoid dangerous things. But because of the job of fear, it can sometimes work overtime.

When fear puts in those overtime hours, kind of like people, it can't really be trusted. When it's been

working so hard and has been so aware, fear kind of stops doing the job it's made for and starts doing things it wasn't made for. So it can help to engage in a practice to bring us back to center again. I was recently in a conversation with a friend of mine. Who's a psychotherapist and an educator in early childhood development. By the way, her name is Rachel. And you can find her at Rachel Pearl [vianet and that's V a N E T T E n.com](http://vianetandthat.com). But some things she said stuck with me and that's right now in these pandemic times. Okay? That part, that word is mine, not hers, but you get the idea. But she said that, "We're all looking to be grounded, but that isn't really possible because our foundations keep moving and our plans keep on changing. Instead of searching to be rooted and still maybe we need to learn to be more like bamboo, still rooted, but more flexible."

I love her words there and I love the word picture, but I'll be honest. It's not what I'd prefer to hear. I'd like to have sureties and solid ground and deep roots. Thank you very much. But in a year where the competence of certainty only lingers in the air like a memory and we're left holding a lot more questions. It's understandable. The fear might be a constant companion in our minds, our hearts and in our bodies. So in the middle of this short series on starting with our senses, it seemed fitting to engage in a simple common practice recommended by the experts when you're feeling afraid. It's easy to remember because it's simply a countdown, five, four, three, two, one.

I'll lead you through it. And maybe you can use this time to settle in to your right now moment, rather than running into the future in fear.

Name five things. You can see, look around the space, wherever you are, and list out five things you can see with your eyes.

Name four things you can hear. My voice is one. Can you name three more?

Name three things you can feel. Maybe a ring on your finger, your feet inside socks. What are three things you can feel?

Name two things. You can smell, smell as a powerful sense. What are two things you can smell?

What is one thing you can taste?

If you still feel afraid, you can go through the exercise again, five, four, three, two, one. Our senses are a gift, and we can always access them. They help to bring us back to this present moment, reminding us of exactly what actually is rather than what we are afraid could be.

And if your right now circumstance continues to be scary, if you can't settle or find an inch of peace, remember what we talk about every single week. You don't have to know everything right now. You don't even have to know much, if anything, at all. Instead, when this episode is over, what is just your next right thing? Just the next thing. Maybe your next right thing is to simply tell one person that you feel afraid today. You don't have to do this alone. What is just your next right thing?

May you have a profound sense of awareness that our friend Jesus is with you always, as you simply do your next right thing and love.

Thanks for listening to episode 145 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of paying attention to your senses when you're feeling scared 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 and a transcript of every episode at emilypfreeman.com. And you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman. If you want a restart in remembering what it means to simply do that next right thing, and you haven't grabbed a copy of the next right thing book yet, maybe now is the time. With 24 short chapters, it could be a good book to start with a chapter a day. And in less than a month, you have 24 practical reminders to help you stay in today and simply do the next right thing.

You can find the book on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, target.com, wherever books are sold, and I hope you do. Well enclosed hear some words from one of my favorite books by Barbara Brown Taylor called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. She writes, "Meanwhile, here's some good news you can use. Even when light fades and darkness falls as it does every single day in every single life, God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you're going and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down. But whether you decide to trust the witness of those who have gone before you, or you decide to do whatever it takes to become a witness yourself, here is the testimony of faith. Darkness is not dark to God. The night is as bright as the day."

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