



148: Remember the Medium Picture

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 148.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but 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.

Before we get started, I'd like to tell you about this episode's sponsor, Skillshare. Skillshare is an online learning community with thousands of classes for the creative and the curious. These lessons can help you stay inspired, express your authentic self, and connect with others in your hometown or around the world. One class that has caught my eye is Filmmaking From Home taught by independent filmmaker Penny Lane. She teaches how to make compelling original videos from footage found in unlikely places. This sounds like an entertaining way to tackle those old home movies that always seem to resurface along with the holiday decorations. Another skill you may want as we head into the holiday season is storytelling through photography. In his class Powerful Portrait Photography, Aundre Larrow shows us how to capture images that both evoke emotion and honor our subjects in their own environments. And the class takes less than an hour to complete! Right now, Next Right Thing listeners can get two months free of premium membership [skillshare.com/nextrightthing](https://www.skillshare.com/nextrightthing). That's two full months of unlimited access to classes like Filmmaking From Home and Powerful Portrait Photography for free just for being here with me. Go to [skillshare.com/nextrightthing](https://www.skillshare.com/nextrightthing) to claim your offer or tap the link in today's show notes. Now on today's episode, listen in.

Ms. Shirley lived in our cul-de-sac since LBJ was president, maybe longer than that, but she can't remember the exact year they moved in. In the spring of 2012, she fell in the middle of the night. She couldn't remember that either. On a weekday after her fall, I sat with her for an hour or so while her daughter went to pick up a bedrail that she didn't want and some nightgowns that she did. Carmella, the neighbor on the other side of the cul-de-sac, sat with us, too. And she's lived here just as long as Ms. Shirley. We sat there together, just the three of us there in Ms. Shirley's small upstairs bedroom. She propped up on her pillow, one eye black, one arm in a sling. And we talked about her grandkids, about her fall, and about our favorite Greek food. The sun slanted through the blinds. Carmella's cane rested against the wall. They spoke of the past as if it was another lifetime. And in a way, I guess it was. I did a lot of listening, and I thought about the dinner I had to make next door at my own house.

They talked over each other, kept to the same topics, but never really responded to what the other one said. Each spoke out of her own version of the truth. This style of relating seemed to work well for them. The conversation was easy and reflective. One said, “Diane would sit on the curb and wait for the older girls to come out and play.” And in response, the other would say, “Lisa played in the yard while I sat on the porch.”

Diane and Lisa are both older than I am now. As they talked, I watched my daughters through the window looking just one inch tall and the space between the blinds. They each held a balloon in the cul-de-sac and they let go at the same time, heads tilted back while they watched the balloons drift up above the tree line. That was eight years ago.

Ms. Shirley moved to Charlotte earlier this year. And just a few months later, we received a sad call from her daughter that she had passed away. Carmella and her husband, they died several years before that. Out of the six houses around us on our cul-de-sac, five have brand new owners, four of whom moved in since the pandemic started. So we just haven’t really gotten to know them very well yet. None of them knew Shirley or Carmella, Lisa or Diane, or any of the generations who grew up around the circle before them, before us. A lot has changed in eight years, not the least of which being our girls no longer play with balloons.

Barbara Brown Taylor taught us to list the things that are saving our lives right now. And for me, as you already know, if you’re familiar with the podcast or our regular listener, one of those things is to have a next right thing posture every single day.

Surprisingly, this does not come natural to me, but with a lot of practice, I’ve taught myself to focus on just one thing at a time. So as not to become overwhelmed by all things at once. This has carried me through some of the busiest seasons of my adult life. And it’s also kept me sane during the monotony of this pandemic. Sometimes though, especially when it comes to my work and my family, I can become so focused on the next step that I forget the big picture. Where are we headed? What is the bigger goal, purpose or intention? As we work to prioritize, consider and discern our next right things, isn’t it important to keep the big things in mind as we go?

Well, it is. But if you think about it, these are the extremes, the big picture and the small next right thing picture. When it comes to making plans and decisions, especially if you feel stuck or overwhelmed, it can help to remember the medium picture instead.

I’ve learned this from a friend and mentor of mine, Beth Silvers, she a few years back taught me the value of the medium picture. It was during a time when some of my daily decisions felt a little bit off balance. You know, those times when you question everything and you wonder if your daily activities are adding up to something of value, or if you’re just kind of going through and doing the thing you’ve always done in certain areas, but you’re not exactly sure where you’re going.

When I find myself grasping for the all caps, very important, big picture of my life and my work, holding the medium picture is a relief when trying to find or to name the big picture feels too hard and when doing the next right thing seems too small. For example, in my work, I might not know where I want to be three years from now, but I can decide what I hope for the next six months to maybe a year or if I can’t even do that, maybe even just thinking in terms of the next 90 days. That’s a medium picture question. That can

give me some direction for now, even if I may not have direction forever.

And here's the key to thriving in your medium picture, once you name it, let go of your obsession with knowing and naming the big picture for now. If I can name the medium picture and if I can practice doing the next right thing, that I'm more equipped to set down my obsession with defining that big picture, at least for a time.

When I look back on that afternoon with Carmella in Ms. Shirley's room, bearing witness to her wounding and slow healing, I think about their lives and the lives of their grown children, because of the difference of our life stages, I naturally had more of a next thing mindset and they had more of a big picture one.

I can't help, but wonder if they were even aware of when their big picture thinking went from looking primarily forward to looking primarily back. The truth is things won't always be the way they are right now. And that might be good news, or it might be bad news, depending on the day, but it is a fact of time and future and history is something to always want to see the big picture, to know if we're headed in the right direction to believe that good things might be on the horizon, but we don't always have the luxury of knowing as big a picture as we would like to know. So we would do well to make some peace with the medium picture and release ourselves of the pressure of seeing the whole thing at once.

Maybe your next right thing is to name a medium picture in your life today, even as you continue to practice doing your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 148 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of remembering the medium picture 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 the transcript of every episode at emilypfreeman.com. And you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman.

In closing, here's a quote from my friend Shelly Miller, who has a brand new book releasing on this very day. It's called Searching For Certainty, and I read it at the very beginning of the pandemic. And I also wrote the forward for it. Let me just tell you, I have fallen all the way in love with this book. It reads as an anthem for the chronically hesitant among us, gently guiding us away from the belief that this life is up to us.

Shelly reminds those of us who long to see the big picture of things that we are, in fact, caught up embraced, invited and surrounded by the larger story of God. But that doesn't mean we'll get to see it the way we want to.

Here are Shelley's words, "Rarely is someone eager to surrender the covering of self-reliance in exchange for the risk of wandering into the unknown, with the unseen. Finding comfort and familiarity is our normal knee jerk reaction when life feels like a giant question mark. When we look at uncertainty through the lens of being loved by God, what we discern is greater purpose, deeper meaning and broad perspective. Love

asks the most important question we are hesitant to ask ourselves, what are you relying on to feel at peace in the world?"

The book is called *Searching for Certainty* written by Shelly Miller, and it's available for the first time today wherever books are sold. Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.