



## 15: Name the Narrative

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 15.

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. One reason why it might be difficult to do the next right thing, is because you just feel plain stuck, stuck in discouragement, stuck in your schedule, or stuck due to circumstances beyond your control. How can you hold on to hope when you feel stuck? Even more, how can you keep from feeling bad about the fact that you don't feel hopeful in the midst of a hard time? It gets layered, doesn't it? Well, that's what we'll do in today's episode. We'll attempt to pull back some of those layers and create a little space for your soul to breathe.

On July 26, 2014, American medical missionary, Nancy Writebol became one of the first Americans diagnosed with the Ebola virus in West Africa. I remember following her story on the news, and months later, once she had recovered, I happened to be on the elliptical at the gym when I saw that she and her husband were preparing to make a statement to the press. I had read about how, at first, she didn't know it was the Ebola virus. She thought it was just malaria. I put that in air quotes, just so you know. But once they learned it was Ebola, she had to be quarantined in the house where she was living. She was grateful for the window in her room so her husband could stand on the other side and talk to her through it.

I shifted my earbuds from my phone to the little channel box on the machine so I could listen in. Nancy's husband spoke first, sharing his gratitude for all the prayers and support. With a pleasant look on his face, he continued to tell the story of how he read from Philippians to his wife when she was sick, how they deeply identified with Paul in that particular book. This may not have been the assignment they had planned, but they took it as an assignment, nevertheless.

When it was Nancy's turn to speak, she shared similar words of Thanksgiving, love, and gratitude. She spoke with compassion about her friends back in West Africa, and she asked viewers to continue to pray for them. I don't know them personally, but I adored them immediately. They seemed like lovely and gracious people. And after several minutes of listening, I went back to my Pandora station, but I kept my eye on that screen.

Pretty soon, they split the screen between the Writebols and the CNN commentators. And I watched the captions to get their reaction to the couple. CNN medical correspondent, Elizabeth Cohen, began to speak, and I read the captions as she said this, "It's interesting that it would be very easy for their narrative to be one of traumatization. She's been through a lot. She said times, 'I thought I'm not going to make it anymore.' But it's not a narrative of trauma, it's a narrative of joy. We can all learn from that."

As I read that caption, I had to slow my pace down so I could record those words as a note in my phone for later. It's not a narrative of trauma, it's a narrative of joy. I left the gym that day and I couldn't get that phrase out of my head. And now, years later, it's still lingers. If you are struggling to discern your next right thing, maybe it's because you feel stuck in a time of transition, of waiting, of grief, or even some type of trauma or loss. I believe this one line from that reporter about the Writebol Family has more to teach us about perspective than what it may seem on the surface.

Obviously, theirs is a lovely commentary on faith. This couple stood in front of the world and spoke humbly, graciously, and with great hope about their experience. They held on to joy, and I'm sure that's the point the reporter was making when she said, "Theirs is a narrative of joy." What a beautiful testimony to the presence of God that this couple, who had been through so much, could stand in front of the world and say, "This was hard, but our God is good, and we trust him completely." This was their public response and it was good and appropriate, but it was just that, their response.

When we're in the midst of difficult times, not everyone responds as the Writebols did, at least not at first. As people who put their trust in Jesus, I think sometimes, we don't know what to say when we see someone going through an impossible time. And so, we rushed them into joy. It can be so easy to refuse to let people grieve the way they need to grieve by telling them, "God is in control." or, "Consider it all joy." Or, "God works all things together for good." He is, it is, and he does, but we are all on our own journey of living into those truths. We would do well to give others space to walk a little ways. We would do well to give ourselves that same space too.

Here's something that is also true. We don't know how the Writebols grieved behind closed doors. We aren't privy to their quiet prayers in the night, their loneliness, their fear. We are hearing their story after she's been made well. Now, as a writer, I've been encouraged by that often shared quote, "Not to compare our messy beginnings with someone else's ending." The translation for that of course is, "Don't be discouraged when you're writing is terrible. The struggle is part of everyone's process. So when you're working through a difficult piece of writing, comparing your rough draft to a finished book is not a good idea.

The same goes for life. When she said, "Theirs is a narrative of joy.", what the medical correspondent caught onto was the narrative, and narrative implies a story. Theirs was a beautiful story of faith, but a story has an arc. That statement to the press was a plot point in the story, but it takes many plot points to make an arc. The story arc can be one of hope, even though each part of the story may have had its share of hopelessness. The story arc can be one of faith, even though the characters may have shaken fist and asked hard questions, and yelled at the top of their lungs. The story arc is joyful, even when the people are broken.

I never want to confuse a joyful narrative to mean that those who are joyful haven't also had dark days. I never want to hold people or myself to a standard of pleasantries and to apply my own definition of what joy ought to look like, or what our culture says joy should look like. I'm thankful for the Writebols, that they were able to go on national television and share their honest story, and that there's truly is a narrative of joy.

I also want to remember though, that within that narrative, there are almost always shadows of gray

along the way. That's what makes it a narrative and not just a moment. It's what makes it a story and not just a plot point. It's what makes it a life. These happen all the time, and we often don't give them much thought. We just let time roll into itself, day after week after year. And then we realize when we look back, "Oh, my story has changed. I didn't even see that happen." Today, let's just take a moment and see what's happening.

If you feel stuck in a hopeless place today, I don't want to rush you to joy. Maybe you need to spend a little time letting the darkness do what darkness does, nourish, strengthen, and hold. The darkness can invite us into a mystery, a place where we don't know the answer. But we do know that seeds need to bury down deep into the ground, sometimes for a long, long time. Eventually, those seeds will break open and take root, but first, they have to settle into the darkness. Still, that seed carries within it, a narrative of hope. It just hasn't lived into the whole story yet.

Today, consider where you are in your own narrative. Are you just starting out? Afraid of looking like a fool? Are you worried they were right and you're not cut out for this after all? This is not the whole story. Let today be a beginning, not a verdict.

Maybe you're in the middle and discouragement or failure or just plain monotony stretches out both behind you and before you. This too is a plot point. Though it may be long, it isn't the whole arc. The middle still counts, even though it's ordinary. Maybe, the middle counts most of all.

Of course, you could be at an end of a season, a struggle, or some other kind of goodbye. Is this the ending you wanted? Is it the one you hoped it would be? Are you feeling disappointed, nervous, indifferent, relieved? Chances are, in some area of life, you stand on the brink of all three, at a beginning, a middle, and an ending. As you take your next right step with your friend, Jesus, remember today as a plot point. See it honestly for what it actually is, but don't confuse the moment for the whole story. In Christ, we live a narrative of joy.

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You can be sure that everything I write or speak about will always have one goal in mind, to help you create space for your soul to breathe so that you can discern your next right thing in love. Find out more about my books and other offerings by visiting [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com). And while you're there, click join and the navigation bar so you won't miss a thing.

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As you consider the plot points of your own narrative this week, here are some final words to take with

you from Romans 15:13. “Now may the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy spirit. This is the word of the Lord.”