



172: Make These 2 Lists Now

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 172.

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 simple next right step.

Before we get into today's episode, I want to say, thank you. Thank you for being a listener of the podcast. We recently crossed 12 million downloads. And this week marks the two-year anniversary of when The Next Right Thing book released, which was on April 2nd of 2019. With all of these milestones to celebrate, it's important to note that none of it would have happened without you. Whether you're a longtime listener or a brand new friend, we would love to know more about you, where you live, how you listen, and what you would like to see more or less of here on the podcast.

To give us all your opinions, visit emilypfreeman.com/survey. And as a thank you for your time, you'll have the option to be entered to win a \$100 gift card to Amazon so you can get yourself or loved one something great. Again, we would love to hear your thoughts and opinions so visit emilypfreeman.com/survey to share them as we're always working to create an experience here that's most helpful for you as you navigate your next right thing in love. Now, onto today's episode. Listen in.

When we have a decision to make, what we want more than anything is an answer or at least a nudge in the right direction. If someone would just tell us what to do, we would be so grateful and we'll never ask for anything ever again, please and thank you. But of course that's not usually what we get. Instead, we work hard and can get twisted up because we want so desperately to make the right decision.

I consider a big part of both my personal work as well as my work here to be the work of helping us unlearn some of our deeply ingrained patterns, including the one where we put insane amounts of pressure on ourselves, or we receive the pressure that other people are putting on us to make a decision in a certain way, by a certain time, or using a narrow set of criteria.

When life circumstances present us with complicated, nuanced decisions, part of our job as growing humans is to do the work of naming and clarifying the most important thing first. Now, of course, I do want to talk about how to actually make decisions because I think it's important to have practical tools for

discernment. And I know for sure that God cares about our decisions. But I'm going to take a risk here and issue a reminder as we get started today.

The most important thing is not a perfectly made decision. It may not even be making the right decision. I know that feels dangerous for me to say. And I'm certainly not advocating that sound or wise decisions don't matter, they do. But the most important thing is the people we're becoming. The most important thing is that you know beyond doubts, shadow or shames pointed finger, that you are loved, that you are seen and that you are not alone. The most important thing is not the outcome of the decision that you make, but the transformation that happens within you in the process. And so much of that transformation happens not as we force and push and demand and try to figure out, but as we recognize there are some things in our life that are beyond us. There is much we cannot control. There are questions that we'll never find answers for, but there is still a hope and a love that is given, not earned.

And here's the upside-down reality. As we begin to practice receiving our belovedness from the actual heart of God, we will actually make better decisions. So, what might that look like in practice? Well, one exercise I've talked about many times and I share also in *The Next Right Thing Guided Journal* is this practice of using two lists in decision-making, a list of questions and a list of arrows. This might not be familiar to you, or even if you already have the journal and you've been practicing this for a few months, it still might not come naturally or easily so I wanted to get into it here and try to use examples or an example so that you can see how to maybe apply this practically in your own life.

Making a decision is sometimes straightforward, but when the decision isn't clear, what we need is discernment. And that's where naming our questions and following arrows comes in. So that's step one, name your questions. Most of you are better at this than you might realize. I hear your questions on Instagram all the time. "How do I know if I should leave my church? How do I support myself now that I realize I don't like my job? What do I do when I need to make an urgent decision and God is silent?"

Those may not be easy questions to answer, but at least they are clear questions. But there are other decisions we need to make that may start out more like a frustration or a problem, but they're not actually a clear question. So I'm going to back up from the question just for a minute and use myself as an example so you can see how this plays out.

Early last year, I shared with you. I even shared here. I shared in my newsletter, probably shared on Instagram, that I was struggling with feelings of loneliness and specifically as it related to my work. It wasn't a question yet. It was more of a discomfort, of frustration or even a sadness. Now I bet that you can think about an area in your life right now where you're experiencing something similar. You're not yet at a place where a decision has to be made and I wasn't either, but you have a sense that you want a change, something's not quite right. And that might lead to some sort of decision in the future. Side note, pro tip, a lot of frustration in our lives comes when we put pressure on ourselves to make a decision, but there actually isn't a decision to be made yet.

If you can't put your decision into one sentence or in the form of a question, then it's certainly not time to make a decision yet. So, that's where I was around this time last year, or maybe even a little bit sooner. I didn't know what to do at first about this lonely feeling, but I kept paying attention. And as I did my regular practice of reflection, loneliness in my work kept showing up on my life draining list. It was something I noticed myself praying about over and over again. And that was, I was asking or wanting a

few other women who I could share my business highs and lows with, women I could link arms with and cheer on and have them cheer me on too. It's not that I didn't have people in my life who were doing this for me, but I didn't have anything structured. And that's kind of what I wanted.

Do you see it there? As I paid attention to what gave me life in the past, to what was life draining in the present, that is when a question began to form. And here was my question. Are there other women like me who would want to link arms and be intentionally supportive of one another in our work and in our business? And if so, where can I find the right fit? Now, I had a question to carry, didn't have any answer, but at least I had a clear question.

When we have questions, it's natural to want answers. But there still wasn't exactly for me at that time a decision to make, because the answer didn't just depend on me. And so, when the answers aren't yet clear or don't just depend on you taking an action, what we usually can depend on are some sort of arrows, not a fully answer, but maybe one next right thing. Step one was to clarify the question. And so step two is to begin to look for and follow the arrows.

Most decisions are not just a simple math problem. Here's a problem, here's the solution. Now some decisions are like that, but those aren't often the ones that give us trouble or keep us up at night. Most decisions are multilayered, multi-steps and unfold over time. In other words, there's a lot of middling in decision-making. And the more we can normalize the middle, the more we can give a framework and a naming structure to the middle, the more we might feel at ease when we find ourselves there. Not that it's going to be easy, but at least it could be more familiar. The middle is where the tension is. It's no wonder that we want to rush to the resolution. Who likes tension? Definitely not me. But that tension is where formation happens. It's where the learning happens. It's where you are becoming.

This is why I've spent the last four years talking about discernment and decision-making. It's because it's in these places of indecision where we have the greatest opportunity to connect with God and to know ourselves and to ask for help. Unmade decisions have the power to wake us up to more, but not if all we do is demand an answer.

Paying attention to the arrows rather than demanding that answer is a lifelong practice, but I admit I'm getting better at it. That doesn't mean that they always lead to celebration or wins. Back to my example. Once I named the question about knowing I wanted to find a group of women to support and to be supported by, I could have pushed to create a group right away. I could have done that. But as I paid attention to my life, to my emotional wellbeing at the time, to my body and even to my prayers, the arrows for me were not leading to that yet. So I started to carry my question around in my everyday life. And then I paid attention to where the arrows pointed.

Following an arrow is just another way of saying do the next right thing. One arrow was this. I started to ask other people what they do when they feel work loneliness, and then I took notes. I paid attention to people talking about this on Instagram or articles that I would see in the news or in other areas that I was paying attention to at the time. A strong arrow for me was this one. I felt compelled to ask an already existing group if I could join them. I thought that might actually be my answer. But as it turned out, that was just another arrow. That group wasn't the right fit. And to tell the whole truth, when I asked, the group said no. Was that a tough blow? Sure. But does that mean I followed the arrows wrong? No, it doesn't. It was my next right thing at the time. And asking for what I need is something I need practicing even when

I don't get it.

Sometimes you think you found your answer, but it turns out, no, that was another arrow. And you remain in the tension of your unanswered question, but look at all the growth that's happening there. And so for me, I kept holding the question. Now, some of you might be listening right now, super exasperated with me, "Emily, if you have a problem, go out and find a ding-a-ling solution already. Make your own group, start your own thing. You know people. You've got resources, just do it."

Well, I could have done that. And listen, in the past, I have done that. And I promise you, in the future, I will do that. But for this particular decision, at that particular time in my life with everything that was alive in me and everything that was happening around me, that was not the move that I felt compelled to make.

The arrows were not pointing to that action at the time. Now, a quick personal update. Now over a year later, the arrows have pointed to a group and I ended up paying attention to a couple of friends of mine who are doing similar work that I'm doing. I ended up asking them if they wanted to join me in a more formal, meet-a-couple-times-a-month type of group. And they both said yes, and now we're doing that. I do have that kind of support now that I was looking for, but it didn't come quickly and it didn't come easy, but I'm so grateful for what I learned in the process.

Decision-making is such a personal and unique practice. There isn't just one right answer for evermore. If you had the exact same question as me, your journey to finding an answer or following arrows would be unique to you and to your life. The decisions that we make shape our lives and the discernment it takes to reach those decisions is something we're always hopefully developing.

If you are carrying a particular frustration right now, maybe it will be helpful to take some time to see what questions your body, your mind and your heart are asking. Can you name them? And once you have a question, does an answer immediately rise to the surface? If not, are you willing to carry the question around with you and ask your friend Jesus for discernment as you pay attention. Are you able to stay open to the arrows and to have the courage to follow them even if it feels like a risk?

It's not easy to stay present and ready in the midst of indecision, but it is evidence that you're paying attention to your life, that you're honoring what really matters, and that you are a person who is growing, learning and becoming as you follow the arrows to your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 172 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of asking questions and following arrows 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 deeper truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

If the principles and practices you hear here are helpful, I hope you'll check out The Next Right Thing book and Guided Journal. Two offerings created specifically to help you make those life decisions, big or small. As I mentioned before, this week marks the two-year anniversary of the release of The Next Right Thing book. I'll have a fun giveaway to share later this week over on Instagram @emilypfreeman

to celebrate that, but for now, we'd love to hear from you. As a reminder, if you could take a few minutes and visit emilypfreeman.com/survey to give us your thoughts and opinions about this podcast, we would be so grateful. Again, that's emilypfreeman.com/survey. And of course, as always, you can find me and a transcript of this and every episode at emilypfreeman.com, just click on podcast.

Speaking of Instagram, I'm casually and informally hosting a one hour-ish, I told you it was informal, Q&A on Tuesday evenings. I've done it once. Maybe I'll do it another time, maybe I'll do it forever. Who even knows? But I'll be doing that over on Instagram stories, but instead of Q&A questions and answers, it's Q&A questions and you guessed it, arrows. If you have a question about your next right thing, you can pop it in the question box on Tuesday evening, and I'll try to suggest some arrows for as many as I can. Of course, the best arrows are going to come from you, but we'll work with the form we have and try to have a little fun along the way.

Well, in closing, here are some words on discernment from Anne Lamott in her book *Help, Thanks, Wow*.

“We learn through pain that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisons, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them, we can't find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help and knowing which direction to face, you'll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you'll see at least one next right step you can take. The response probably won't be from God in the sense of hearing a deep grandfatherly voice or via skywriting, or in the form of an LED-lit airplane aisle at your feet, but the mail will come or an email or the phone will ring. Unfortunately, it might not be later today, ideally right after lunch, but you will hear back. You will come to know.”

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