



175: How to Find a Mentor with Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 175. 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. Well, you're in the right place for thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

But before we jump into our conversation, I'd like to share a word about today's sponsor, KiwiCo like many of us here in The Next Right Thing community, KiwiCo believes small steps today can make a big impact on tomorrow. That's why they strive to inspire curiosity creation and innovation and kids right here right now through their funds steam project crates for trailblazing toddlers, to inquisitive teens, and every stage in between KiwiCo brings exciting new discoveries to kids of all ages, through its innovative and accessible art science and geography projects delivered right to your door each month.

My teenagers and I have worked our way through several maker crates by now with each one being as engaging and fun as the last. And we have our sights set on the macrame planter project as a fun stress reliever when finals and end of semester assignments start to pile up, inspire a lifetime of curiosity and learning and kids and watch their confidence grow with each crate. They complete. There's no telling what a KiwiCo kid can do. Kickstart curiosity creation and innovation and kids today, and discover a brighter tomorrow. Right now you can get 30% off your first month plus free shipping on any crate line using the code next right thing, all one word at kiwico.com That's 30% off your first month at kiwico.com with the code next right thing.

Now onto today's episode where I'm giddy to host my friend, Natasha Sistrunk Robinson. She's a writer and international speaker, a leadership consultant and a mentoring coach.

She's also the visionary founder of the nonprofit Leadership Links, Inc, which we'll talk some about. I hope in this interview. She's the author of *Mentor for Life*, *Finding Purpose through Intentional Discipleship*, and *A Sojourner's Truth*, choosing freedom and courage in a divided world. She's a graduate of the US Naval Academy and a former Marine Corps officer, Natasha has nearly 20 years of leadership and mentoring experience in the military government, church seminary and nonprofit sectors. In fact, there may not be an area where Natasha has not been or been a leader in as the chairperson of the board at Leadership Links. Natasha's vision is to holistically develop transformative and redemptive servant leaders who are united in community and committed to invest in long-term generational and cultural change. I can speak firsthand to the beautiful work that leadership links is doing. I first heard Natasha

speak in person at The Apprentice Gathering at Friends University several years ago, her talk was titled Our Stories in the Wilderness. For 26 minutes and 57 seconds, Natasha had that entire room hanging on her every word. You can watch it on YouTube all and get in the show notes. But what you can't see in the video was the standing ovation she received at the end. Though we don't host interviews often here on The Next Right Thing, Natasha is a leader I couldn't wait to share with you.

Emily:

Well listener, if you have never heard of Natasha Sistrunk Robinson, mark this day on your calendar because you're about to meet a leader who is bold and vulnerable and grounded and an all around delight. Natasha, thank you so much for joining us today.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Girl, thank you for having me. So glad to be here.

Emily:

It is an absolute delight. Well, I'm going to jump right in with you because you've just got too many good words to say for me to chit it away. I know one thing that you've said, I'm reading your book, A Sojourner's Truth. We'll get to that in a minute, but you say, "Long before I knew I was a Christian or a leader, I understood that I was Black and a woman." And I'm curious if you could share with us right here at the beginning, in what ways would you say that your roots have helped define your calling? And in that, I wonder if you could share some of the defining moments of which I know there are many, but if you could share some of those with us, we would love to hear.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Yeah. Being Black and woman, I think the roots is just I was raised by a whole bunch of Black women and it's just because I have more women in my family. My maternal grandparents were married until death. My grandfather passed away. My grandmother is still living, she's 94 and she has five sisters. She has three brothers, but I only met one of them. My mother had three sisters, only one brother. My father who raised me had five sisters, only one brother. I just had a whole bunch of Black women around all the time. And they were loud and kind and funny and strong and resilient. And I just kind of adopted all those things. And so that was kind of my foundation as a Black woman.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

But I was raised in the South. I was raised in a small town called Orangeburg, South Carolina and it had two historically Black colleges and universities. And so that shaped me for education. It shaped me for culture about being Black, being a woman. It taught me about Black excellence. And in that town that was small, there was a lot of poverty, there was a lot of hardship and all those things as well and that shaped me. And I think the town was very integral in the civil rights movement and I knew about that growing up.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

There was a massacre in my town so all of these things really were at the foundation of my formative years before I even knew what role those small things played in the bigger picture of everything that was going on in the country and in my life. But they were just there as normal, just a part of my being. And

that's what I mean about before I knew I was a Christian, because we talk about Christianity a lot as our relationship and also our identity. And so that was my first identity. And so yeah, that was the foundation.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

And I guess the second question about leadership, I grew up around a whole bunch of Black people. And so I think a defining moment was leaving that space, which for me felt very loving and affirming and safe and going into the Naval Academy, which is where I attended college. That was predominantly white, predominantly male, predominantly privileged. And I was a small fish in a big pond where I came from a place where I was a big fish in a small pond. And so it was a lot of cultural shock, social and historical awareness, a lot of uncertainty about my identity because before all those things I named were positive, but then coming into this environment, it was I was an anomaly in a lot of ways. Certainly I'm a minority. And so that was a huge thing. I've been shaped largely, Emily, by grief. And that has been a very defining part of my life. And I think lastly, just my tribe, I love people and I've had the privilege of having a lot of wonderful people in my life from childhood, even into adulthood and those people really impact how I live.

Emily:

You point out, I've heard you point this out many times in different settings about how leaders are formed in community and that there is no such thing as a self made leader and you just spoke that so well and knowing a little bit about your story and even reading and learning more about it, I've been struck by how much that has been true in your life and how, by the time you got to the Naval Academy, which is, as you said, was an extremely different environment than the environment that you grew up in. You were already so deeply formed in many ways as the leader that you would grow into, but those roots were there. And so, I think a lot of listeners struggle with when they think about decision making or kind of stepping into their next right thing or making choices that might put them in a situation where it doesn't feel like a safe place or it's different from where they have come. And I'm curious for you, can you speak a little bit to that decision that you made to do that on purpose? And to what degree did you know what you were stepping into at the time?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

I didn't know. I had no clue what I was stepping into at a time. I think, one thing I do in my book, *A Sojourner's Truth*, is I'm telling my story alongside Moses and the Exodus narrative. And so I define going to the Naval Academy as my burning bush experience. Not that it was sacred in the same way that God was audibly speaking to me, but it was very clear that God, when I got the letter of acceptance that God was putting me on a path. That was clear to me and I had some understanding that that path would change the trajectory of my life. Whether or not I went there or any of the other schools that I applied to, it felt like a very weighty, significant decision to make. And so I understood that. I understood that spiritually, even though I wasn't really all in on my relationship with Jesus.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

I say I was Jesus proximately. I was close enough to know who to call on when I got in trouble, but not so much that he was guiding every part of the decisions of my life. And so that's just the thing. But when you talk about the social understanding and all the things we're talking about now regarding equity and race and even issues regarding women and leadership and all of it, none of those things were on my mind at 18. I wasn't thinking about that at 18. I had no clue. I was really shocked when I got there to understand that people really still had some thinking of stuff I read about in books. That people were still thinking that

way. And that was more than 20 years, 25 or so years ago now. That was a little bit shocking to me.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

But I say about that and I say to your listeners who are kind of in these places that might not be safe is that there are some places that you cannot go to find yourself, to figure out who you are. The only way you survive it is that you know who you are when you get there. And that's the good thing for me that I knew who I was when I got there. And not only did I know who I was as far as my identity, I was clear on what my purpose was. It didn't matter to me what happened. People, a lot of times, people quit the Naval Academy for example. I had many a tough days, not once did I think about quitting because my purpose in going was to graduate.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

And so the people who were coming against me, they didn't understand that, but I was very clear when I went, I'm going to graduate. And so, I had that. And I think lastly, I would say this is that it's important when we talk about that tribe and community that we understand how our stories are attached to others' stories and other things that are going on. My mom was a veteran. She served in the army. Her brother was a veteran. He did a career in the army. Her father was a veteran. He did a career, he was a World War II veteran. And so I came from a patriotic family that formed and shaped me. That was important. But the other things were very practical things. Emily, I was young. I was skinny. I was lower middle class poor, depending on the year. I was Black and I was a woman.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

And it was important to me as the oldest child in my family, knowing that that was my parents' reality, that I could take care of myself. I wasn't waiting for somebody to marry me to take care of me. I wasn't waiting for my parents to send me a check. It's when I left house at 18, it was like, this is it's my responsibility to care for myself as an adult. And so part of my going to the Academy was a very practical decision that I like they're going to give me a great education, but I also like they're going to give me a job.

Emily:

Well, I've been reading your book, *A Sojourner's Truth* and I said to John, just the other day, "I just love having Natasha's voice in my head." And that's what it is for me is reading you a little bit every morning. You are a mentor to me and maybe not in person, but through your writing and I know thousands of others can say that too. I hear from a lot of people weekly, who long for mentors in their lives, but they say they don't know where to find one or they don't know how to get quote unquote, get one. What would you say to someone who really longs to have a mentor, but they don't know where to start?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

It's so funny because I'm reading your book too. I started your book is not one of those things I think you don't read it to finish. You read it, it's a process of reading. You keep going back to it. And so that's kind of where I am with it. I started reading it last summer. And so just this morning I picked it up again and I was reading the chapter about you don't need so many gurus.

Emily:

I know. Right?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

I'm laughing because I'm listening to you, so I have you in my ear, you don't need this many gurus. And then here I am the mentoring woman and you get yourself a mentor. And I do. I think that when we think about mentoring, it's important to ask the what and the why. The what and the why. And so the thing that what do you want or need from this person? And why is this the right person to give it to you? And so I think for mentoring, a lot of times, it's important as mentees that we have clarity about that first. And you talk about this a little bit, you need vision about where you trying to go? What are you trying to do? Because if a person is for lack of better terms, qualified to be your mentor, the chances are, they got something going on that you're seeking out.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Which also means that they're leading very active and productive lives. And so they're not necessarily looking to invest in a relationship that's going to be a waste of their time or not a good investment, those type of things. I'm just being honest about that. And so what I say to mentees a lot is make it easy for the person to say yes, when you ask them to mentor. And the way you can do that is that you're clear about what you're coming for. You're clear about what you need. You clear about the amount of time it's going to take. You're saying, I've gone to people and I say, when I was really kind of working on this writing thing to say, "I need you to mentor me. You're paying your bills from writing I don't pay my bills for writing, I need to know what you're doing, so you can learn how to pay my bills from writing."

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

I've gone to women and say, "You are a prayer warrior. The stuff that I'm up against in life feels like a lot of spiritual warfare. Can you teach me how to pray the way that you pray?" There are all kinds of ways and so I think the challenge to your conversation about having too many gurus is that we're trying to do too much too soon or all at the same time. And to understand that every mentor is not for everything. And so you go to the right person that you need for that thing to be specific about what you need and then to be specific about the time that you're asking them to commit. I find that when people come with that, it makes it easier for a mentor to say yes.

Emily:

It's so good and I love those practical steps because I think sometimes we can tend to feel like it's a unicorn mystery, how people learn things from others. And if only I had that. And kind of with that posture in mind, one of the things you do that I love and support is that you're the visionary founder of Leadership LINKS. You all if you don't know about the LINKS, you can look it up, but this is just such a lovely community of mentors and young girls who are led to be leaders in the community. And one of the things that you say and it's one of the mantras that you repeat together that can make a really huge impact in one's life is connecting with the right people in the right place at the right time. And when I've heard you say that every time it brings tears to my eyes.

Emily:

And I think part of it is because of the simplicity of it. Part of it is we all want to be in the right place with the right people at the right time. And the other part is sometimes we can feel like we have missed an opportunity or we've missed out, because what if my decision that I'm weighing right now is going to land me in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people? That's a mouthful to ask you, Miss Natasha, if you can help a listener who might be feeling some anxiety about a decision they're carrying or even just the place where they are in their lives, where they think, how can I know that my next right thing will lead to me being in the right place at the right time with the right people? And how can I maybe not

feel like I'm missing out?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Right. Yeah. With the nonprofit, which the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is Leadership LINKS Incorporated and you are part of the Leadership LINKS' network so we thank you for that. And so I think that's important to say, because part of what we're saying and the creed that you're talking about is we are your right people. We're making a covenant and agreement together in reciting that creed that we are going to be the right people for each other. On one hand, that's already a good base and foundation. You have to go out and seek a whole bunch of things because your people are right here with you. We are the right people. Now is always the right time and you're in the right place. In other words, some people say, "What you have, what you need is already in your hand or right there in the room and sometimes we just don't ask."

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

I was just having a conversation with my daughter about this last night. I think first thing you want to say is, at the foundation you asked earlier about my roots, who are your people? Before you start talking about where you're going to go, take a survey of your current situation. Who are your right people? What is your current place? What is God calling you to right now at this time? I think it's always important to take an assessment of where we are first, because if we don't do that, so you talk about this, we call it like FOMO, this fear of missing out. And so we have this FOMO or this fear and first we have to say about, fear is not of the Lord, fear is of the evil one.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

And so if anytime we are anxious or fearful about something and that's the motivation, there's probably a good chance we're not going in the right direction. Because we're not starting in the right place. And so we can always grab for things and reach for things and reach for people and it surely can lead us in a wrong place if we're not starting at the right position. I will say that first of all, just survey your current situation. But when we're discerning about kind of what's next and who are the right people to connect to going forward, I think that for me, I receive these things as invitations from the Lord. And so what I mean by that is that trust the process. Say you do go to the wrong place or you do get connected to the wrong people, there is a lesson to learn, even in that. If you take a detour. And I think if we are so afraid that we're going to do it wrong, sometime that paralyzes us from making any kind of decision and you know that not making a decision is also in and of itself a decision.

Emily:

Yes it is, Absolutely.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

You have to make a decision. Move, trusting that God is with you on the journey and even if we miss the mark or we fail that even in that, God can use it and we can learn something either about God or about ourselves in the process.

Emily:

Well, speaking of making decisions, you and your family have recently made a big old move. And I'm wondering if you could share with us what played into that decision making process for you and what arrows? You talked about kind of thinking about following the process, trusting the process, listening to God and I call those arrows. It's just the next right thing. Are there any significant arrows or even small arrows that led you in that decision making process?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
Girl, oh gosh.

Emily:
It's just an easy question for you.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
It was a lot. It was a lot. And I'm laughing because it was hard not to make the decision to come here, but even to make the decision to go there. And so we're back in North Carolina. We spent the last year and a half in Alabama before we went there, I had never been to Alabama. I had no reason to go to Alabama. I had no desire to go to Alabama for all the reasons. And so I would say, we're talking about arrows and direction and guidance and something that will be beneficial to your readers, I like to be really practical. One I will say, be attentive. Have you been obedient to what you already know? And so we went to Alabama and we still believe that we were obedient different in going to Alabama, even though it was hard and difficult. And it was not the best experience overall part of that was because of the global pandemic. But we was just so far away from home. It felt very isolated. I had a lot of anxiety, but I felt, my family still feel that God led us there.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
And so we were obedient in that. We didn't have all these uncertainties in our minds like, oh, are we doing the right thing? It was very clear, god sent us to that place. That was kind of already there. Take that survey, are you obedient to what you already know? That's the first thing. For us though, my husband got a new job, but the job that he got allowed him to work remotely. Technically Emily, we could have moved anywhere. We could have lived anywhere. And so were obedient to the call to go there. We were honest about the experience. And so again, what that God allow us to learn in a process? We had a lot of conversations about that. What was this about? What was us being in this place about? Has that been fulfilled? And that determined about us moving. Be honest about your current situation.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
And then I said this before, but what is God inviting you into? And I say that because I think there's two things kind of to think about with that. One is your prayer. How's your prayer life in that? And so for us as a family, one of the things my husband and I always prayed and we're making decisions together, that's going to impact the family like all of these decisions do. Of God, open the doors for us that no one can shut and close the doors that you don't want us to walk through. That's a prayer that we pray. We pray that earnestly.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
And so for me, when something doesn't work out or doesn't look like it's working out, it's easy for me to let it go. That wasn't for me and that's fine. But then if God opens a door, in your language will be an arrow. Is that okay, I'm paying attention to that. In the example of Moses' life, the burning bush. Moses had to go over the sea, this is peculiar. What's going on? This is different. And so we pray and we wait and we hear and we listen to God. That's very, very important.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:
And then I want to say this because it's a very honest one, pay attention to the temptation too. The temptation for us was to go back home. In other words, you know we were living in High Point. We still

have a house in High Point. It would have been very easy just to leave Alabama and go back to my same house, go back to High Point, connect with my same friends, our nonprofit there. That was very easy to do. That was the temptation. And I said to my husband, I said, “You know what? But God took us out of that place.” That’s number one.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Number two, you have a lot of nostalgia about the place, because the place you went to was not that, it was worse than that, but let’s be clear. There were things that were disconnected in that place that you were not content with. Only reason it feels great is because you were in something worse. Let’s be honest about the temptation of all of that. And when we got honest about that and the temptations, then the conversations say, “Okay, back to what’s the invitation?”

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

And so for us, it was just some practical things. My daughter, she’s going to high school, where do we want her to finish her high school years? Education, community, all those things. For me as a mom and as an entrepreneur, I want to be close to her. Where can I go and have actual real work and ministry opportunities? Well, I don’t have to go on the airplane because I want to be where she is in high school. And then my husband can get a direct flight from here to where his company is. A lot of those things kind of played into it. That’s a lot, but I wanted to give you some kind of practical things that people can just hold onto when they’re in these decision making processes.

Emily:

Well Natasha, I’m so glad that personally your next right thing was to move back to North Carolina. That’s a little personal thing, but I’m just so grateful for your time and attention, not just here, joining me on the Next Right Thing podcast, but also for the work that you’ve done for leaders and to help us understand kind of what the importance of mentors, the importance of formation in community and the work that you’re doing with small groups of people over long periods of time. Thank you, thank you, my dear.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

You’re welcome.

Emily:

We are so glad to have you join us today.

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson:

Glad to be here. Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

Thanks for listening to episode 175 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of paying attention to the leaders and mentors in your life 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.

You can learn more about Natasha, Leadership Links, her books and ministry at natashasrobinson.com.

And you can also find her on Instagram at [@asistasjourney](#) or [@leadershiplinks](#).

One thing before I go, I want to tell you about a fun summer activity that may be coming to a city near you, which how long have we been waiting to say things like that? Again, as you know, The Next Right Rhing Podcast is proud to partner with Annie F Downs and her That Sounds Fun Network. So I'm delighted to share with you that Annie is taking her own show, you guessed it, That Sounds Fun on the road this summer! The tour will stop in 12 cities from June 10th to the 27th. And tickets are on sale right now at [anniefdowns.com](#).

If you've ever listened to That Sounds Fun Podcast, which releases every Monday and Thursday, you know, this tour is going to be a good time. There will be special guests, appearances from friends, giveaways, comedy, confetti, and you'll get to be in the audience for a live podcast interview for her show. And Annie has taken every precaution to make sure that each event follows local COVID guidelines when it's showtime. For a list of the cities on the That Sounds Fun Podcast Tour and to buy tickets, visit [anniefdowns.com](#). Well, that's all I have for now. Y'all thanks so much for joining me and I'll see you next time.