



## 177: The Next Right Thing for People Pleasers

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 177.

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.

But first a word from this episode's sponsor, Ritual. I love a good origin story so when I learned that Kat Schneider founded Ritual because she wanted a better option for herself as a new mother, and a way to combine both the analytical and creative sides of her brain, I was fascinated. Her result, a multivitamin that's clean, vegan friendly, and made up of high quality nutrients that your body can put to work right away. And there are no added sugars, GMOs, synthetic filters or artificial color. I personally love that the capsules are delayed-release and essenced with mint so the whole experience feels fresh and lovely. Plus Ritual's committed to a visible supply chain. So you know exactly what you're taking and where it comes from. Ritual is the multivitamin re-imagined and they've made it easy to integrate into your routine. My Ritual essentials for women are delivered to my door every month with free shipping. And I love that they offer the option to snooze or cancel subscriptions whenever you want.

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At the beginning of this month, I sent out a survey for you to answer questions about the podcast. Thank you, by the way, so very much. Super helpful to hear your thoughts, but a word to the wise. Don't ask what people think, unless you really want to know their answers. Of course, I did want to know your answers, but as you can imagine, anytime you ask people what they think, you have to be prepared to remember what my friend Keas Keasler says, "Feedback is neutral." We get to decide what to do with feedback. For example, one question we asked was what topics, if any, would you like to hear more about on the podcast? Or what formats do you prefer?

Well, one survey responders said they wanted more interviews. Another said we do way too many interviews. The fact is that we have done roughly 181 episodes. I know that's not reflected in the numbers, but we've had some bonus episodes. So out of about 180 episodes, of those, 11 were interviews. For one

person, 11 is way too many. And for another, it's not nearly enough. If you're a people pleaser, this begs the question, which people do you try to please? Now to be clear, I'm not actually concerned about this question specifically as the information's helpful for me. And I wanted people to answer this question honestly, but it's just one example that illustrates the dilemma that those who struggle with people-pleasing can find ourselves in when we're confronted with various opinions. Here's another illustration.

There are two shows that John and I, and sometimes our kids, still watch that, when I say this with my out loud voice to human people that we watch these shows, their response is usually, "What? I thought those shows went off the air years ago." Well, one of those shows is Survivor. And the other one is American Idol. I still remember where I was when I watched Kelly Clarkson sing At Last at her 2002 audition in front of Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul. And if you saw it too or maybe you've seen the YouTube video, she wore a shirt that she made out of pants and it was like a whole big thing.

Well, back then American Idol had way different feel. It started out pretty low budget, lots of neon blue. A big part of the show back then was making a big deal out of the less talented singers, often bordering on the wild and ridiculous singers. And they would sometimes make those people feel really bad about themselves. Well, that was almost 20 years ago and American Idol has evolved and redefined, they've even moved networks, rebranded themselves. And now, even though they still have some wacky auditions, they make less of those. And when they do allow for a silly audition, judges, Luke Bryan, Lionel Richie and Katy Perry have found a way to be playful and supportive of the person even while sometimes gently letting them know they will not be going on to Hollywood.

Well Idol returned this season. And toward the end of the premiere episode, the daughter of two high-profile political figures auditioned. She grew up in the spotlight and now she's clearly wanting to make a name for her own self. At 16, she's choosing to begin her legacy solidly separate from her parents. And even though she stood with her chin up, it really didn't hide how thin her confidence actually was, insecurity and youth tucked neatly into black leather pants. Well, she sang her first song and it was pretty good. At the end though, judge Katy Perry told this young woman that she sang like, "Someone who couldn't wait to read the comments when the song was over."

Well, then she sang her second song. And when that song was over, Katy looked at her thoughtfully and offered some sound advice. This one I'll quote directly. "There's a lot of noise in your life." She said. "You have to calm the storm that is around you. Meaning before you sing, you have to get off your phone. You need to stop reading your comments, push it aside. Because if not, you may never rise above your dad or your mom. It's your choice." This moment on American Idol has a lot to teach us if we can broaden our perspective from a TV singing competition. The truth is we can probably all relate with that young contestant in some way. No, our parents probably aren't high-profile political players in DC. And no, we don't all have a million followers on TikTok, but we all have the capacity to live our lives in such a way that we forget to remember who we are. We hurry through our minutes looking for the next important thing. We are overly attentive to what people think of us and we're addicted to our own press.

So what's the next right thing for those of us who are so aware of other people's opinions, that we have a hard time knowing our own or making wise decisions, or basically doing our next right thing in love? If you ask me, and I'm going to pretend that you're asking, the antidote to people pleasing is not refusing to care what people think. Instead, it's well differentiated leadership. In his book, *A Failure of Nerve*, Edwin Friedman writes about leadership in the age of the quick fix. He writes about the systems of families

and institutions, and he calls out the peace mongers or those who are highly anxious risk avoiders. He describes this kind of leader as one who is, “More concerned with good feelings than with progress. Someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus, a middler, someone who is incapable of taking well-defined stands.”

“Without question,” he writes, “The single variable that most distinguished the families that survived and flourished from those that disintegrated, was the presence of a well-differentiated leader.” You might be wondering what in the world is a well-differentiated leader? Well, first and foremost, it’s someone who can lead herself. A well-differentiated leader is someone who has clarity about their own life goals so they’re less likely lost in the anxious emotional processes that can sometimes pull us under. It’s someone who can be separate while remaining connected. Someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in response to others, and therefore be able to take stands and risk displeasing. What counts the most is a leader’s ability to be present and to be with, even when the system or the group is displeased.

Back to Katy Perry. What she was saying to that young contestant was essentially this. Lead yourself first. Be present. Be attuned, not to the anxious fickle system of commentators, likers, sharers and opinions. But show up without permission from the anxious system. People pleasing is not a brush it away, bless your heart kind of bad habit. People pleasing is a serious problem. It’s a dangerous cancer. And if you don’t find the courage to name it and the clarity to reject it, the prognosis is grim. It’s keeping you from your best work and sabotaging your influence.

The antidote to people pleasing is not a lack of care or breezy indifference. No, it’s actually learning to care in a different way, a truer way, a way as one who is a well-differentiated leader. The secret about people pleasing is it doesn’t actually please the people. Because what wounded anxious people need most is not you as they think you ought to be. But is the solid presence of a well-differentiated leader who insists on being okay with or without their consent. This is as true for a parent as it is true for a president.

So what’s our next right thing if we find ourselves stuck in a vortex of caring deeply what other people think? Well, first you have to know who you are. When I interviewed Natasha Sistrunk Robinson on Episode 175, she said a couple lines that I have not forgotten. She said, “There are some places that you cannot go to find yourself to figure out who you are.” She said, “The only way you survive is if you know who you are when you get there.” If we continue to step into places and spaces without knowing who we are, then we could be stuck in a cycle of looking around to figure it out, rather than looking within, to our life as it’s united with God, to our image bearing identity. To break the cycle of people pleasing, you have to know who you are first, your deepest identity.

And then second, when you know who you are, you have to have practices in place that help you practice being who you are. And this is not just about who you are, but it’s how we are. The first is about your identity. And this one’s about your spiritual formation. What needs to be true about your rhythm of life so that you can show up as the person you are and not be so easily moved, swayed, or influenced to be a person whom you are not. What core values are vital to your wellbeing, such that if you were to forget them or cast them aside, you would not be living an integrated life?

And then third, when you know who you are and you practice being who you are, you also need to learn to make peace with crisis. And now let me explain what I mean by that. I don’t mean that we have to live in a constant, heightened state of emergency, or that we need to just accept the fact that trouble exists and

we should not do anything about it. No. But our job also is not always to try to fix everything and make everything okay right now. Friedman says this. “Living with crisis is a major part of a leader’s life. And they come in two major varieties. Those that are not of their own making, but are imposed on them from the outside or within the system. And those that are actually triggered by the leader, doing precisely what they should be doing.”

That one can be uncomfortable because that’s saying sometimes your next right thing is going to disrupt something. The fact remains that most crises simply cannot be resolved. Not right now, sometimes not ever. And sometimes when we do our next right thing, like I said, it might actually cause unpleasant circumstances or what we could call crisis. They must be managed until they work their way through. All the more reason why we need to know who we are and be able to self lead and remain a fixed point rather than frantically searching for the right solution.

It is not your fancy technique or your ability to please everyone, or to make them all happy that’s going to make the biggest difference. Instead, it’s your well differentiated presence. The sooner you realize the myth of people pleasing, the better off you’ll be, and the better able to make an actual difference in the world around you. In your own areas of influence, I wonder what it would look like for you to take Katy Perry’s advice, to quiet the noise in your life, to calm the storm that is around you. Thankfully, the Kingdom of God remains strong and unshakable with or without our permission. I’m thrilled we have a God who remains unflappable, who cares deeply for me without giving into my anxiety, who remains present with me even when I’m spinning out.

As you consider your next right thing, here are a few lines from John O’Donohue’s Blessing For A New Leader. “May you have the grace and wisdom to act kindly, learning to distinguish between what is personal and what is not. May you be hospitable to criticism. May you never put yourself at the center of things. May you act not from arrogance, but out of service. May you work on yourself, building and refining the ways of the mind. May you learn to cultivate the art of presence in order to engage with those who meet you. When someone fails or disappoints you, may the graciousness with which you engage, be their stairway to renewal and refinement.”

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Thanks for listening to Episode 177 of The Next Right Thing. I hope the simple practice of being a well differentiated leader 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 our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram @EmilyPFreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a copy of this and every episode that you can download, if you prefer reading to listening.

In closing, a few final stanzas from that Blessing For A New Leader from John O’Donohue. “May you have a mind that loves frontiers so that you can evoke the bright fields that lie beyond the view of the regular eye. May you have good friends to mirror your blind spots. May leadership be for you a true adventure of growth.” Thanks for listening and I’ll see you next time.