



92: Point and Call

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 92.

This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or even if you're great at making decisions, but in your current season of life you could use a little reminder to simply do the next right thing, well, you're in the right place.

Doing the next right thing isn't a phrase I came up with myself. It's been used by Mother Theresa, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, Elizabeth Elliot, and Anne Lamott, just to name a few. It's a guideline for living in Alcoholics Anonymous. It's become a common catch phrase for coaches and athletes in boardrooms and in corporate motivational speeches. Sometimes it's the simplest phrases that have the power to change our lives, and this one is no different. And it's no wonder since they say adults make over 35,000 decisions every single day. Every choice we make determines our life in big and small ways.

My audacious goal in these few minutes we have together on Tuesdays is to make one simple suggestion for you that could help ease the load of your own daily decision making. Sometimes the simplicity will be so simple it may border on the ridiculous, but sometimes it's the simplest things that help to ease our decision fatigue the most. Listen in.

The railway system in Japan is one of the best in the world. I read about this exceptional and methodical system in the book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, where he writes in chapter four about how the conductors have a ritual of pointing at different objects and calling out commands. The commands are simple and obvious, much like what you might see a toddler do naturally, but instead of the curious prattle of a child, these railway workers are performing important professional tasks, though it may not look that way at first.

For example, they point at the signal and say, “Signal is green.” When the train pulls in to and out of the station, the operator points at the speedometer and calls out the speed. At the time of departure the operator points at the clock and calls out the time. You see what I’m saying. Other members of the staff will do similar tasks on the platform as well, pointing at objects and calling out facts about the status of the train. The details are identified, pointed out, and named out loud. This entire process, if you haven’t guessed yet, is known as pointing and calling. It’s a system designed for safety in order to reduce mistakes, and it works. One source I found based on a 1996 study says pointing and calling is known to reduce workplace errors by up to 85%.

I could have used a point and caller on a train platform this summer in London, actually. My girls and I were traveling to Camden Town for shopping, just the three of us. Earlier in the day, when John was with us, it was easy to have one parent lead the way while the other one walked in the back. But the guys went one way that afternoon, and the girls and I went the other way. So as a solo parent on this particular shopping trip, I had a moment of panic as we walked down the steps to the Tube because I was imagining being separated from my girls, them on the train without me and them not knowing where to get off while I stood on the platform by myself. Never mind that they’re 15, they’re taller than me, they’re perfectly capable of reading directions and navigating their way around; this was London, it was a foreign country, and I’m their mom and I’m responsible for them.

So when we arrived on the platform, I had a plan. I didn’t want to accidentally send them off on the train alone, so I confidently stepped onto the train first. But what I failed to realize was that it was equally terrifying for me to leave them behind on the platform, which was almost exactly what happened.

I boarded the train and I waited a split second too long to look behind me to make sure they were with

me, only to see the doors closing and the girls on the other side of the window. Well as it turns out, a couple of hurried travelers had stepped between us and blocked their way onto the train, but thankfully the doors sensed the obstruction and immediately opened up again long enough for the girls to jump on really quickly.

But it was sloppy, and it felt dangerous, with people shoving and doors beeping and my reflex mom arm reaching out frantically out of the door to pull them in. So while it may seem over-reactive and unnecessary to some, to have a human person on the platform pointing and calling out the obvious, we could have avoided those harrowing few seconds if we had a train worker on our side that afternoon. Pointing and calling doesn't rely on a worker's eyes or sheer habit alone. Instead, each task is reinforced both physically and audibly, ensuring the safety step is complete and precise.

The closest I've come to seeing a point and caller wasn't at a train station in Japan, but at the indoor water park. I've talked about them in depth in episode 22, about my deep dislike of indoor water parks, but long story short, I'm obsessed with the lifeguards at the indoor waterpark because, y'all, if you haven't seen them, they never stop moving. In episode 22, I talk about embracing our limits, and those lifeguards are a perfect example of that.

It's as if they've been each assigned an eight foot length of the pool, no more, no less. They're responsible for those eight feet and anyone who swam within those eight feet, and while they aren't exactly pointing and calling, they are extremely aware of their surroundings and what's happening in front of them. They pace their assigned distance back and forth on the edge of the pool. Their eyes never leave the water, their heads nodding up and down. Whistle is ready between their lips, life preserver propped beneath their arm. It is a sight to behold if you've never watched these lifeguards at an indoor water park.

Another example of pointing and calling: before leaving for church when I was younger, and probably still now, my mom used to check the stove top and look at all the knobs saying out loud, "Off, off, off, off." She did the same thing with the iron and with the coffee pot. I think she even unplugged them, and then she would say "Off, off," out loud.

On Friends Monica and Ross, you know they did a similar practice before a trip: "Passport, check.

Camera, check. Travelers checks, check.” I always laugh at that part.

Pointing and calling brings our awareness forward. It takes something that is typically subconscious and makes it conscious. The train operators use not only their eyes but also their hands, their voice and their ears as well. If the simple, redundant, and elementary practice of pointing and calling reduces workplace errors by up to 85% in the Japanese railway system, I wonder what a similar practice could do for us in other areas of our lives? And how can that help us make more informed decisions?

Well, I can think of several ways to incorporate this simple point and call practice, depending on where I might be struggling. When I’m feeling scattered, it helps to start the day with a point and call-like practice. I shared all about my morning rhythm of prayer, reading, and writing in episode 90. It’s a simple way of pointing and calling by making a tiny declaration of time in the morning to pray what I believe, to write down some questions, gratitudes, and reflections, and to read something true.

When our kids were little and we wanted a simple way to connect on a daily basis, we would sit at the top of the stairs and share our favorite part of the day. We named our time, wait for it, Top of the Stairs, but this too was a way of pointing and calling, of saying out loud together what happened that day and why it was our favorite, in a way that even the youngest in the family could understand.

When I feel stuck in my journaling, or when the days are going by in a blur, one of my favorite ways to point and call is to use a simple listing practice that I call my These Are The Days Of list. By the way, I know you’re floored by my stunning ability to name things, it’s fine. What I do is I sit down for five minutes, and I make a simple list with These Are The Days Of at the top, and then I bullet point what’s happening in my right-now life.

A few days ago I wrote this list. These Are The Days Of: working on a conference talk, of the first school football game, of listening to Anne of Green Gables on Audible, waiting for a friend’s baby, evenings on the front porch, celebrating John’s birthday. All of these things would happen without my pointing them out, but naming them, using my hands to write them down, even my lips to say them out loud, is a way of being with what is, of bringing the simple things in my life to my awareness, of waking up gratitude. In the same way those train workers use the simple point and call practice to maintain their awareness of their surroundings in order to keep people physically safe, we can point

and call in our own lives, to keep ourselves and our families soulfully grounded.

As you reflect on your own life today, where could you use a simple point and call? Is there a gift in your life that's all around you, but it's become so regular and so ordinary that you've forgotten to remember how grateful you are for it?

Point at it now and call it out loud. Is there a person in your life who stands on the sidelines, who supports you and cheers you on and creates space for you to be fully yourself? Point them out and call it out loud. Is there something good, true, and beautiful about God that you've forgotten, but now you're starting to remember even just a little bit? Point at it now and call it out loud. Is there something good, true, and beautiful about you that's been lost, buried, hidden, silenced, or overlooked?

Maybe the most important next right thing for you today is to point at your own giftedness, and call it out loud. In the inspiring words of John O'Donohue,

“May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.”

Thanks for listening to episode 92 of The Next Right Thing. Well, I hope this simple practice of pointing and calling can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, but the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

It's always an honor to walk with you as you continue to do your next right thing in love. If this podcast has been helpful for you, I hope you'll leave a review on Apple podcasts. And by the way, don't forget to pick up a copy of *The Next Right Thing* book if you haven't yet. It's a beautifully designed hardcover book that makes a lovely gift, if I do say so myself. As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com, or on Instagram [@emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman).

Again, the practice of pointing and calling is for the purpose of keeping people physically safe, for us it

can also be a way of keeping ourselves soulfully grounded. In closing, here are a few words from *The Next Right Thing* book, all about the power of naming the narrative, which is another way to point and call.

“Because it’s important to name where we are. It’s more like a song than a definition. Sometimes the song is all you need, other times you play that song on repeat to let its melody smooth the jagged edges of your soul. If you take time to name something that’s remained unnamed within you, a fear, a loneliness, a heartbreak, a dream, or a regret, resist the urge to grab and go. Instead, give that name some space to rise up and take shape.”

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