



## 98: Don't Preach to Your Emotions

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 98. 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 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. You'll find a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step every Tuesday.

Listen, making decisions we know is hard enough, but add the unpredictability of emotion to the mix and making a competent decision can feel for some of us nearly impossible. What do we do when we have a decision to make, but we have such strong emotions surrounding that decision that we feel paralyzed to move one way or the other? It's a great question and I can't say I have a clean linear answer, but I do have thoughts and I hope you'll listen in.

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One of my earliest most self-aware memories is the belief that I was too sensitive. We could go on and on about where that came from and how it developed, but just to save time, I'll say all of us, no matter how healthy and safe your childhood may have been, we all have false narratives that we tell ourselves about ourselves. They start when we're young and hang on until we face them, and this was one of mine: Emily, you're too sensitive, you just need to toughen up.

I'm sure you could fill in the blank with your own false childhood narratives, but if yours is similar to mine, then you know the unique struggle of having a decision to make, but feeling like you need to

make it with a level head, free of all emotion, and based only on the facts. This sounds logical, but the longer I live, the more impossible and perhaps unhealthy that perspective is for me.

First of all, when it comes to emotion, for me, there's no backroom, there's no backdoor, bucket, or basement. If my soul were a house, it's a house without walls, open concept, free range. There's no secret underground room to store all the pain. What that means is every interaction, conversation, gathering, and decision has an emotion that accompanies it.

To be clear, that doesn't mean that I let other people see that emotion. It just means that I am incapable of being unaware of my emotions. I feel them instantly and I can name them almost as quickly. I may not know why I feel a certain way, that might take more time, but I immediately know that I feel a certain way. It's undeniable, it's in my face. It's rejection, betrayal, delight, sadness, fear, frustration, annoyance, joy. I feel these emotions clearly, daily, and sometimes in the same hour. Are you exhausted yet? Tell me about it.

Well, if you haven't figured it out, historically I have seen this as a negative thing. But I'll tell you, over the last few years, specifically this year, I'm beginning to see a third way through. Rather than categorizing everything in life as either this is positive or this is negative, I'm starting to see my emotionality as a neutral thing. It's not good or bad, it's just true. But just like everything in life, there are both gifts and challenges.

The challenge of feeling things deeply and immediately is that the feeling always wants to be the headline. In the past, I thought maturity meant not allowing feelings to have a part in the story at all, wiping them completely away, but that never seemed to work and for good reason. Denying the emotion was denying my design. Now, I'm learning that living a full life means letting my emotions have a voice, but not allowing them to run the whole show. They're allowed a place at the table, they're just not allowed to sit at the head. That's the challenge.

But there's a gift to receive in all this as well. Emotions can be intuitive, they sometimes have more access to the truth than I think we give them credit for. Emotions can help us more quickly admit what we really want, and if we're willing to listen to them in a healthy way, that can save us years of denial and frustration. Emotions can be a reflection of the image of God, allowing us to empathize in

His presence and to move toward people in love, even to extend understanding and patience when the world seems to offer only continued frustration.

So yes, our complex emotions carry both burdens and gifts, but what do we do when we have a decision to make so fraught in emotional context that we're unable to see a way through even for the next right thing? Well, if that's you, I'm going to give you a few simple steps, three of them, to help you find your way forward.

First, take a beat. Time does not heal all wounds, but it can bring perspective of why the wound was so painful in the first place. I have never once in my life regretted pausing before I respond to something. I have, however, regretted responding too soon. If you're facing a decision that feels charged with emotional energy, first, refuse to shame yourself for it and instead take a beat.

For you, a beat may be five minutes. In some situations, if the decision allows room, you might need five days or five weeks or five months. I can't say exactly how long a beat will be for you, but I can say I've never regretted taking one. Remember, feelings always want to be in charge. As the grownup, we get to acknowledge their presence, welcome them to the table, but don't allow them to sit at the head, and that kind of work takes a little bit of time.

Number two, be specific. This one takes patience and discernment, but for me it's been immensely helpful. Sometimes a decision feels emotionally impossible because I'm looking at it as a whole, but when I sit down and I first name the emotions attached to it and then parse out which piece of the decision brings that emotion, well, that can bring a lot of clarity to the surface. So dare to be specific. Maybe not with the people involved, if there are people involved, but at least with yourself.

For example, are you nervous about the actual event you've been invited to attend, or are you just anxious about the plane ride it takes to get you there? Do you want to say yes to that promotion because you truly want to do the work required by the job, or just because in the moment it feels exciting to be picked? Are you hesitant to commit in that relationship because of the relationship itself, or because you've been hurt in the past and you fear a repeat? Take a beat and be specific.

And finally, number three, do what you can, not what you can't. Sometimes there just isn't time to take a beat or to be specific. You have to make decisions in the midst of the grief, distraction, loneliness, betrayal, and exhaustion. In this case, do what you can, not what you can't.

One of my teachers and favorite authors, Jan Johnson, talks about doing what you can, not what you can't when it comes to spiritual formation. She says don't set the expectation that you'll pray for two hours every day. If you can, then do it, but if you can't, then do what you can. Pray for 10 minutes or two minutes or a breath. Let that be enough for now. Do what you can.

If you face a decision, and anger or anxiety is so thick, you can't see straight, then anger or anxiety is so thick you can't see straight. So do what you can. You see how you can't change that moment or that emotion. Admit it, acknowledge it, and then do what you can.

Can you take a breath? Can you phone a friend? Can you ask for an extension? Can you lean hard on your friend Jesus for the next 10 seconds?

If so, do it, but don't hold yourself to impossible expectations. Take a beat, be specific, do what you can.

Your emotions are not your enemy. They can be a barometer for you helping you to discern what's right and what's wrong, what belongs to you and what doesn't, and how to move forward towards others with empathy.

In his book, *The Listening Life*, Adam McHugh writes that quote, "We ought to listen to our emotions before we start preaching to them." I have never forgotten that line.

Here's what else he says, and I'll continue the quote.

He says, "Let's not tell them what to do before they tell us what they're already doing. There's a time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. It's okay to not be okay. It feels like people in advertisements are constantly telling us what to feel or not feel. Scolding ourselves for being irrational or telling ourselves what we should be feeling is counterproductive. Shoulds almost always

get in the way of genuine listening. Instead, let's allow our feelings to come and go as they will without judging them, white washing them or correcting them.”

Listen, I highly recommend that entire book, *The Listening Life* by Adam McHugh.

As we close, let's take our cue from Adam and continue to remember those wise words from Ecclesiastes 3.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

This is the word of the Lord. It is absolutely true and given to us in love. Thanks be to God.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 98 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple habit of listening to your emotions can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true that this is a podcast about making decisions, but the bigger truth, as you know, is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

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Well, in closing a few more words from Adam McHugh and his book, *The Listening Life*. He writes,

“When the two disciples who walked to Emmaus reflected on their night with that oddly familiar stranger, they marveled that their hearts burned within their chests as he spoke. A central part of the Christian spiritual life, then, comes in paying attention to the moments when our hearts are burning. In those times, we may just find that we are not alone.”

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