



187: State of the Podcast 2021: The Next Right Thing Turns 4!

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 187. 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 are in the right place. You'll get a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

Well, I eased back in last week with a late summer reflection, minus the intro and outro, because sometimes it's fun to mix things up a bit. Today, we're back to our regularly scheduled program, and I couldn't be more grateful to be here with you. This month marks the four-year anniversary of The Next Right Thing Podcast, and to mark the moment, I'll be delivering unto you a State of the Podcast episode.

Now, if you're curious and want to go back and listen to previous state of the podcast episodes to compare, guess what? You can't. I've never done one. In four years, I have never done an episode that looks back on this time that we've shared together. I've never really had a legit birthday celebration for The Next Right Thing. And while I've definitely mentioned the anniversary in passing, I've never dedicated a full episode to what's going on around here, how did we get here anyway, and where might we be going. In an effort to practice what I preach, today's episode will be a little of all of that as we celebrate four years of The Next Right Thing. Listen in.

Well, because it's a birthday celebration, I wanted to have a little fun with this episode, but because it's me, I feel compelled to make it useful for you, so I'll use the same framework I follow for reflecting on basically everything. A life energy list, a gratitude list, what questions I'm holding, and what arrows I'm following.

In addition to sharing some of your favorite episodes based both on the stats as well as the stories, and some of my favorite episodes based on my singular opinion, I'll also pull out some key pivots over the last four years of hosting this podcast. I'll do that because while I know that you might not host a podcast and you come from a variety of backgrounds, professions, interests, and hopes, I also know that you are probably making something of your own right now and you wonder if you're doing it right, if it's working, if it's worth it, or if it's time to make a change. While I won't be sharing any directives in this episode, like you must do this or don't do that, sometimes it's still helpful to hear the behind-the-scenes thought process of someone else so that you can take what they've learned and make it your own.

If you're new here, or if you've been around since the beginning but have your own life and aren't paying close attention to the details of mine, here's a quick refresher. The first episode of *The Next Right Thing* dropped in August of 2017 after a yearlong struggle with what I called the decision-making book that was not to be. By that time, I had written and released four books in seven years, and I thought I had an idea for the fifth, but no matter what I did, I couldn't figure out how to get my book idea about making decisions to behave into an outline, a clear concept, or a compelling slant. I am a writer. I write books. What is actually wrong with me? I will never write again, I felt sure. Well, if you're new here, you'll also like to know that I never, ever once not ever overreact.

Anyway, as author and entrepreneur, Marie Forleo reminds us clarity cannot be rushed. And so, as I sat with this swirling idea about how unmade decisions have power and how the process of making them have shaped who we are and who we're becoming, well, the idea to put the book aside and start a podcast instead grew so large in my mind, I couldn't ignore it. That's something to note. The reason I started the podcast was because trying to write out these thoughts was life-draining. Trying to make my ideas file into familiar formation wasn't working. When things aren't working, it's frustrating for sure, but the frustration is often the spark we need to get a better fire to burn.

I spent the summer of 2017 learning how to record and edit on Audible, how to upload episodes to the internet, and the best practices for hosting a one-woman short-form show without interviews. As it turns out, there were no tutorials about how to do exactly what I wanted to do, because I hadn't done it yet. And so with that first episode, a four-minute introduction to the podcast, I started something that I knew might not work. Maybe that points to one of the first few things I learned after doing this over four years, and that is the action will come when the fear of failure is outweighed by the pain of not having tried. Start before you think you're ready. Well, since that first episode, we're now at 187 episodes, and over 13 million downloads later. By the way, if you want to hear the details of my own creative process from trying to write the book to it not being a book to this becoming a podcast, check out episode 60, *Start Before You're Ready*.

Well, now for that life energy list, when I think over the last four years, I ask myself two questions. What's been life-giving, and what's been life-draining about hosting *The Next Right Thing*? Well, when I look back, the most life-giving parts for me, that part's easy. Connection with you, the listener. Also, using my voice in new and creative ways that I've not really done before. I've loved having a schedule I can count on. It releases every week on Tuesday mornings. The podcast has given me courage, the courage that I needed to create *The Quiet Collection*, a short audio devotional series that I create and release each Christmas season. I've loved this form. I've loved exploring it and kind of making things up as I go along. That's been extremely life-giving for me.

So what's been life-draining? Well, I'll share a little bit more about that as I highlight some of the pivots that I've made. But the biggest one for me, the most life-draining part, is also part of what's life-giving, and that's the consistency that's required. I am not the type of maker who can plan far ahead. I have monthly content calendars for the podcast, but that is very recent. For example, I know what the episodes are going to be for the month of August, and that is it. And let me tell you, that's huge for me. That took blood, sweat, and tears to make an August content calendar for the podcast, and that was only possible really because I took four weeks off of the podcast, and it gave me the clarity that I needed to kind of make a schedule for coming back.

I used to go week by week. I still do that sometimes. In fact, the entire first two years of this podcast, you may not know, I would show up to work on Monday and I would not know what the episode would be, only to have it written, recorded, and edited by me by the end of the day, ready to drop on Tuesday. Y'all, for two full years, I worked on 24-hour turnaround with a one-woman show and it was not ideal, but that's how I made this thing work, because I knew I only had one day to make this work, to make the podcast happen. And so I took that one day and I tried to make the most of it. But after a while, that was life-draining and I knew it wasn't sustainable for the long term.

Another thing about hosting a podcast in general for me that can be life-draining is the questions that sometimes creep in. Am I doing this right? Is there a better way? If I were more, whatever, fill in the blank, smart, funny, cool, creative, whatever, then this would be easier. In summary, doubting myself takes a lot of energy and it drains the life right out. I'm working on it.

Well, in four years, what has stayed the same and what has changed? Well, some things that have stayed the same, it started out as just me in a tiny closet and it's still just me in a tiny closet. I've also always said I wanted to explore the power of unmade decisions and I wanted to talk to people who feel stuck for whatever reason in their decision-making process. That remains the same. I'm still talking about doing The Next Right Thing, uncovering how not knowing something actually becomes the pathway to knowing ourselves better. The episodes started as a weekly show, placing a high priority on short form narrative, less than 15 minutes, and always including some kind of reflection at the end. That format has remained relatively unchanged. If you go back and listen to the intro episode from four years ago, it's going to sound pretty familiar, though I will say the sound quality is better now.

And that leads to what has changed. In the last four years, what are some key pivots? Well, a big thing is, I hired somebody to edit this podcast. Y'all, it is still just me recording in a closet, yes, but after two full years of doing all the work by myself, I finally hired someone to edit the audio of the episodes for me. Thanks to Unmutable and the team there who have for real saved my life when it comes to doing this podcast.

Another thing that's changed is I now host some interviews. I always said I was not going to be an interviewing hosting podcast, and it wasn't because I'm against interviews. Honestly, full disclosure, it's just easier to record myself. I can record when it works for me. I don't need another microphone or more technology, and when I was doing all the editing myself, the idea of hosting an interview was so overwhelming because it wasn't just one track I had to edit, but it would be two voice tracks I'd have to edit. In fact, if you go back episode... I think it's episode 30 I interviewed Candace Cameron Bure, and I recorded that myself, I edited the episode all myself, and it was so nervewracking, let me just tell you. So I told myself I would not do another interview unless I had someone else on the team who I could rely on to do the tech part so that I could focus on the creative part. And that's what I did. So the priority is still the short form, single host narrative, but I've brought on a few guests over the years to have conversations about their next right thing. These episodes tend to be a bit longer, but I've appreciated the insight that comes from the conversational form.

Another thing that changed in the summer of 2020, I joined a podcast network called That Sounds Fun, as you may know. I added short ads to the beginning of the podcast in order to both cover some of the costs of the podcast as well as link arms with others in an industry that often feels isolating and lonely, to be quite honest. You can hear more about that decision in episode 130. It's called Do What Sounds Fun.

But the newest change that you don't know yet is, earlier this summer, I decided to leave the network, which means, at least for a while now, I won't be hosting those same ad spots at the beginning of the episodes. The reason for that change was really... Well, it was multifaceted, but the biggest reason for it was because I knew I wanted to take a full month off and I didn't feel like I could do that if I was committed to a network. So for now, I'm not a part of a network, but I absolutely loved the entire team at That Sounds Fun. They were so good to me and continue to cheer me on, and who knows what might happen in the future?

Well, if I were to make a gratitude list about the podcast, there would be several aspects to it. One is, I'm so grateful for the creativity that it's both required of me and encouraged me to chase. In a full circle kind of way, after my editor faithfully listened to every episode those first several months, she came to me and said, "You know you've been writing your next book. Every episode is a chapter." No, I did not know that, but I was so grateful that she did. Publishing a book with the same name as a podcast, *The Next Right Thing*, it isn't really a pivot, but it was the biggest surprise of the podcast, because that decision book that didn't want to cooperate back in 2016, 2017, finally came to be in 2019. It released in April of that year under the title *The Next Right Thing*, and then this year, 2021, a guided journal was also added to the collection of *The Next Right Thing* to help you practically apply the principles introduced in the book and to reflect on your own life as you make your decisions.

Another thing that would go on my gratitude list when it comes to *The Next Right Thing*, so many things, but one is just, broadly, connection. It's been a surprising gift to collaborate with others in my field, both the writers I've interviewed on the podcast as well as fellow podcasters I'm meeting along the way. But most of all, I have loved connecting with you about these episodes, whether it be just literally through using my voice to speak into a microphone, because though I am doing this in the closet by myself, I always picture you on the other side. I'm talking to a human person, and I'm so grateful that you're listening. But other ways that the podcast has helped me connect with you is on Instagram, or on the blog, or in different mediums where we can connect and I hear from you in DMs, or like I said, on Instagram, where we'll have discussions about the decisions that you're making and where you feel stuck. This podcast has helped me continue to find my own voice, and I hope it's helping you find yours.

As a listener, the best way to thank a podcaster is to listen to the episodes and also to leave reviews. Currently there are 4,461 human people who have left a review of the podcast on Apple Podcasts, and for that, I thank you kindly, although not all of those 4,000-plus reviews are excellent reviews, but we'll carry on. It's helpful and sometimes fun to know what episodes have resonated the most.

Especially if you're new here and you want to know what to listen to, or if you've been around a while and you're curious if your favorites line up with everyone else's, I thought it would be fun in this *State of the Podcast 2021* episode to share with you the top downloaded episodes per year starting in 2017 and moving up till halfway through this year. Well, in 2017, the most downloaded episode was no surprise, episode 1, *Become a Soul Minimalist*. This is also our most downloaded episode of all time. It's the episode with the longest life, so it makes sense that had the most time to gain some traction. But also, many people, and I've learned this along the way, they'll start from the beginning of the podcast and then they'll listen all the way through in order. I would say that's a great way to do it. *Become a Soul Minimalist* sets up the premise of the podcast quite nicely, and this also became one of the first chapters of *The Next Right Thing* book.

Well, that's 2017. It was a short year because, you know, we started in August and it went through December. So starting in 2018, the most downloaded episode of that year was the very first episode that dropped in 2018. It's not numbered because it was a special episode. I was trying out a new format. It was specifically for the new year, aptly titled A Blessing for the New Year. If you need some inspiration for a new beginning, check out that episode, A Blessing for the New Year, at the beginning of 2018.

2019 was the year the book released and the year I graduated with my master's in spiritual formation and leadership, so there was a lot happening that year. The most downloaded episode of the year 2019 was episode 88, Come Away for Awhile, where I talked about the difference between a break, a vacation, a rest, a retreat, and a sabbatical, as well as the importance of all five.

Well, could you guess what the most downloaded episode was in 2020, our year of grief, of shutdowns, quarantines, and cancellations, our year of reckoning and spending more time with the humans in our house or, in some cases, more time alone, or in other cases, more time on the front lines when you would rather be home? Well, it was episode 120, What To Do When The World Shuts Down.

And though we're not quite through 2021 yet, the most downloaded episode so far is episode 161, Change Your Mind, where we explore one of my favorite but little-known secrets about work, calling, vocation, and purpose, which is just because you're good at something doesn't mean you have to do it forever.

Well, that's the story the numbers tell, but for what it's worth, I'll also mention that the episodes I hear you mentioned the most in my DMs and email are episode 11, Wear Better Pants, about the spiritual practice of wearing pants that fit us. No, that's not a metaphor. We talk about actual pants. And then episode 65, Take Off Your Crown, about what has made the difference for me between living with all-consuming daily stress and a lighthearted sense of hope.

So that's you, and of course I love all of those episodes. They were my idea. But you might also be curious about which episodes so far in four years have been my favorites. Well, it is hard to pick. I will share three that stand out, and I'll share them in three categories. A little behind the scenes, when I think of creating episodes for this podcast, I tend to think in three categories. Those categories are rhythms and routines, spiritual formation, and the third is what I formally call straight-up decision-making. Of all the episodes I've done about rhythms and routines, my favorite one is episode 73, Design Your Rhythm Of Work – Theme Days. I love it because I was able to finally put into words what I actually do and how I divide my time, especially as someone who is multi-passionate and who has a lot of different jobs that I'm responsible for. And in sharing that, I think it really helped a lot of you practically apply it in your own life and work.

Well, when it comes to the spiritual formation episodes that I've done, my favorite, or one of my favorites, so far is episode 167, Spiritual Direction for Beginners. And I like it a lot. I loved doing it because it was helpful for me to put into simple words what spiritual direction is, the role it's played in my own life, how it's different from other forms of soul care, and to introduce it to a generation of people who may not be familiar with spiritual direction in their own faith tradition.

And finally, my favorite episode in the straight-up decision-making category that's episode 103, Look For The Children: Mister Rogers and Decision-Making. For a long time, actually, I had been wanting to do an episode about Mr. Rogers, one of my favorites. And then I read Tom Junod's article that probably many of

you have read about Mr. Rogers, which is ultimately the inspiration for the episode and how Mr. Rogers's posture toward people can be one that we learn from when we make our own decisions, big or small.

Well, so far I've shared what's been life-giving, what's been life-draining, what I'm thankful for, some of your favorites, as well as some of mine. To round out this reflection, I'll finish up with two of the most powerful parts of the reflection process, because these are what move us forward into our next right thing.

First part, what questions am I holding these days when it comes to this work? Well, if you would've asked me this maybe, I don't know, six months ago, maybe even three months ago, they might've been questions about format or strategy. And to be honest, I do have a few questions about that, but those aren't the ones when I think of the state of the podcast. Those aren't the questions that are at the forefront right now for me. Right now, one main question I'm holding as it pertains to the podcast is how can I better cultivate connection among this community of listeners who are committed to your next right thing? It's a question I've carried for a while actually, and it's one that I honestly haven't had the capacity to be creative about, but I do look forward to that and I do still carry the question. I don't have a clear plan right now about what that might look like, but I just... That's a question I'm carrying, is how to better cultivate connection among this community of listeners.

And then finally, when it comes to the state of the podcast, when it comes to doing my next right thing, an important question I think we all have to ask when we're doing any type of reflection is, what arrows am I going to follow? Notice I didn't say what answers do I have, because I'm learning, as you may already know, not to look for answers as much as arrows. Answers aren't necessarily bad or wrong, but they can force a control I'm not really comfortable with, and quite frankly, answers force a certainty that I don't actually think is always needed. But arrows? Well, following an arrow is congruent with our next right thing posture. Following an arrow moves us in a direction, and, well, that's what I'm all about.

When it comes to arrows that I'm following, I'm essentially asking, what's my next right thing for The Next Right Thing? Well, first, one arrow keeps showing up for Tuesdays. Another one, stick to the content plan for August, and then create another plan for September. Another arrow, I'd like to make a list of dream collaborators. I'm not even sure what that means yet, but one thing that I want to get better at, and this is an arrow I wrote down just for, in my personal life, in my guided journal this past week, is I wrote down to be more conscious and aware of, when people reach out to me, to reach back out. It's something that's weird, and maybe that sounds obvious to some of you, but for me, it's not always my first reaction, is to actually respond or to connect with someone. Making a list of dream collaborators helps me be more aware of when maybe one of those people is reaching out to me, and it will help me know, actually, I'd like to reach back. And then finally, one arrow that I might follow I haven't fully decided this yet, but I think I'd like to outline the Quiet Collection for Christmas 2021, a brand new one. We'll see if that comes to fruition.

Among all those things, if you're looking for a theme, it would probably be consistency. Just keep doing your next right thing, Emily. Show up, stick to the plan for now, and create as you go. If I keep doing that and you keep listening in, well, the state of the podcast is strong and grateful for these four years. We've been through a lot together. You've taught me to trust myself more, to use my voice even when I'd rather not, and that this is a safe place to take a risk. It's an honor to companion along with you and to be in your ears as you walk the dog, load the dishwasher, drive to work, get ready in the morning, or drift off to sleep at night. Thank you for your attention. I will never take it for granted. Now, let's keep doing our next right thing together.

Thanks for listening to episode 187 of The Next Right Thing. Well, it was fun to look back and remember where we've come from because it gives moving forward some context. Maybe you'll want to borrow this framework for reflection for yourself, by asking yourself in an area of life, what's life-giving? What's life-draining? We call that a life energy list. What am I grateful for, what questions am I carrying, and what arrows am I following? That's a little twist on the regular Q&A.

Of course, you can write your answers down any old where, but why would you do that when you can keep your answers all together and be asked these questions on a monthly basis in The Next Right Thing Guided Journal? The journal that I created for you is available online or in stores, and you can start it at the beginning of any month. You do not have to wait until the first of the year to reflect on your life. So here's to intentional reflection, to making meaningful lists, and to celebrating four years together.

As always, you can find me on Instagram at @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where the website is slowly getting a lovely facelift. You can check that out. Well, in closing, I'll share a quote from Fred Rogers about the gift of listening. "More and more, I've come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other be an adult or a child, our engagement in listening to who that person is can often be our greatest gift." Thank you for listening, and I'll see you next time.