



## 189: How to Use The Next Right Thing Guided Journal

Is the life that you're living the same life that wants to be lived in you? Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. That's Parker J. Palmer and let your life speak. I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 189. 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 and sometimes a guided tutorial.

At the beginning of this year, we released The Next Right Thing Guided Journal and it came about for several reasons. One, it was a response to readers and listeners like you, who said you loved the prayers, practices and lists mentioned in the book, *The Next Right Thing*. But you had wished that you had a place to record your progress, capture your seasonal reflections and explore on a more personal level, the impact that your decisions were having on your everyday lives. It was also personal for me as the contents of this guided journal are basically a collection of lists and practices that I've been keeping for years, and here they're collected all in one place.

And then finally, why did we create The Next Right Thing Guided Journal? Well, a less obvious reason is that this is really me wanting to do my part in companioning you, as you discern, as Parker Palmer says, the life that wants to be lived in you. Whether you have the journal already, and maybe you're hesitant to start it because you aren't sure how to use it in the right way or if this is the first time you're learning that I even created a guided journal at all. Well, this episode is for you. I'm going to put everything here for you all in one place so when the episodes over, you can begin or jump back in to this reflective practice and discern the life that wants to be lived in you so that you can in turn do your next right thing in love. Listen in.

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One thing that I'll say right here at the top is this journal is meant to be a tool for you. And that means that though I will share with you some of the ways it was intended to be used and also some of the ways that I use it, the truth is however you use it is the right way to use it. The goal is not to get something right, to turn something in or to do it in a way that someone else does it, and isn't that a great metaphor for life. So I want this to be as helpful as possible for you. So this guide/tutorial or conversation, I'm going to lay it out as a simple five part framework. It's the who, what, when, why and how of The Next Right Thing Guided Journal. Let's jump right in.

Number one, let's get started with the who, who is this journal for? Well, it's not just for someone who has a big decision to make right now. I never imagined that, oh, I have a big decision to make right now, I'm going to get this journal and it's going to help me make the decision. Do I think the journal will help you make that decision? I do, but it's not really for a one-time decision. It's more about walking with you as you live your life and as decisions come, this journal is a kind companion to help you discern your next right thing. You also don't have to have read the trade book *The Next Right Thing*. So the journal, if you've seen it on shelves or online, the journal has a white cover, it's paperback. *The Next Right Thing* book is a trade book that has 24 chapters, which is 24 loose principles to consider when making your own decisions. So there are two different things, they do work really well together, but if you haven't read the book, you can still pick up the journal.

And I would say, if you've read the book, I think the journal makes a really great gift for someone, even if they haven't read the book. It's also for the person who might not be a natural journaler, it's very low commitment, many people only write in this maybe once a week or a couple of times a week. I personally write a little bit every day and I'll share more about that in a little bit. But if you are a regular journaler, this will probably be used as a secondary journal to your blank journal because usually people who journal every day probably write in a blank journal, write out whether that's stream of consciousness or morning pages like Julia Cameron recommends. If you haven't heard of the Morning Pages, you can Google that, Julia Cameron Morning Pages, three pages of long form every day. For many that's terrifying though, and that is not what *The Next Right Thing Guided Journal* is.

This journal has prompts and lists, it's not blank, it's guided. It's also for the person, for example, who loves that week between Christmas and the New Year when you look back over your year, over what you did and where you went and who you were with, this will be a great companion for you. If you use it over the course of a year and you can pull it out during that week between Christmas and New Year's and it's going to give you so much insight into the year that you just lived. If you're struggling through a time of transition or change, or if you've had a lot of unmade decisions or directions that you could go moving forward, if you're worried about choosing the right and best thing for your life, whether you're a 15, 25 or 50, this journal will serve as a fixed point for you through every decision making season of your life.

It will not tell you what to do, but it will guide you in discernment toward the possibilities. It will help you name what feels hopeful, to articulate your own questions and to take just one next step forward. So that's who it's for, but number two. Okay. So what is it? Well, the journal is quite simply a rhythm of reflection made simple. It has a place to record seasonal, monthly and weekly reflections with guided lists and questions for you and they repeat, it's paperback so it's easy to carry with you. And it's designed to last one full year, 12 months of reflection, gratitude, questions, and arrows and other lists that we'll talk about in a minute. So that's what it is. Number three, when, we did the who, the what and the when, when do you use the journal? This is a topic of great discussion.

One of my favorite things about this journal is that it covers 12 months, but here's what I'm here to tell you. You do not have to wait to start the journal in January. Although if you do, that's a wonderful time to start, but the goal here is not to obey the calendar, the goal is to pay attention to your life. When we stand at the end of one season and we're starting a next season, whether that's a season, according to the calendar like winter, spring, summer, fall, or if it's a season like school beginning or school ending, or starting a new job, or having a baby or entering into a relationship or ending one, it's tempting to race right ahead into the future without ever stopping to consider what you just lived through. But that racing

ahead costs us something. And we might not realize what we've paid until we approach that same season another time, whether that's a year later, several years later. And then we feel like we're reliving the same issues, questions, insecurities that we have had in the past.

I've said before, it's the same song, slightly different, but mostly the same dance. Well, instead of doing that, a regular practice of reflection and recording that reflection can help loosen up some of the rope patterns, some of the knee jerk reactions that we all have and some of the habits that we repeat, just because that's what we do. When it comes to making decisions for our future this practice of reflection can help to shine a kind light on decisions that we've made in the past and how they actually turned out, not as a practice of regret, but as an invitation to reflect, so that's the goal. The goal is paying attention to your life. So this guided journal has room for reflection for 12 full months. And that can be any 12 months. So you can start in September, you can start in February, you can start in April, it does not matter. I personally started mine in December.

The journal, as of this recording, has only been out for a year, since I wrote it, I got a copy in December, it didn't release until January. So a lot of people started it in January, which is an excellent time to start. But again, it doesn't have to be January. This November, I'll finish up this journal and I'll start a new one starting in December. If you want a deeper dive into thinking about starting the journal at a particular season, that might not be January, you can listen to episode 165, journal your seasons. Now, the months in the journal are grouped three at a time with seasonal reflections afterward. But again, here's the invitation not to let the word season box you in.

So when to use your journal? Hopefully I've convinced you that it's okay to not start in January, but when practically do I use it? I have my journal in my morning next to my morning chair. So I sit in my sun room, I leave it on my table in my sun room and I leave it there with my Bible, with my more long form journal, which is just a blank journal, as well as whatever book I'm reading that season. Usually in the mornings, I read a nonfiction, Christian living or spiritual life books, sometimes memoir, something like that. But I leave my journal there with that stack. And sometimes I'll write in it every day or so. I write a line or two in it every day or so, depending on the list I'm looking at, but sometimes I'll go a week and not write in it at all. And I am 0% behind when I do that.

I'll share more about how I use mine in the house section, but first number four is why? Our choices are one of the defining factors of our lives. If we only think about the choices we have to make that are right in front of us right now, today, we're missing out on what I believe are some of the most incredible teachers in our lives. And those are the choices that we've made in the past. This will help you bring those to mind, not as a practice of regret, like I said, but an invitation to reflect. Why a guided journal? Well, when I go through life without reflection for too long, I feel like I'm only half human. I forget who I am. I forget what I most deeply long for, what I hope for. I walk around with long to do lists and a low grade panic. Why a guided journal? Because invisible things are real and our inner life matters.

This is a simple and approachable way of paying attention to both our outside life and our inside life and then simply naming what we see because God is up to things in me, because my people are telling me things, because my soul is trying to speak. And we're always being handed clues from our people, from ourselves, from our schedule and from our friend Jesus, the practice of reflection will help us see the clues and sometimes connect the dots. We've made it to five. The question that some of you have been waiting for, and that is okay, how. How do I use this journal? Well, hopefully I've designed the journal to where,

when you pick it up off the shelf, you can read the front pages and there's a simple walkthrough that explains all the lists and all the ways in which you could use the journal much of what I'm sharing here today.

But if you have a copy of the journal, maybe you're just someone who likes to hear somebody walk through it, so this might be the part, this is the part of the program where you pull it out and we look through it together. I will fulfill my childhood dreams of being a teacher and telling people how to do a thing. It will help you to know, first of all, that the journal is divided by four sections that repeat themselves, they're four identical sections well, mostly identical sections with a few exceptions. But each season has three months worth of lists and they repeat each month, you do not have to start in a particular season, but it could be most helpful to begin at the beginning of a season the way that we define them typically winter, spring, summer, or fall. So I've mentioned that already. We won't go over it.

One thing I'll say before we go through what those lists are, is that throughout the book, I include several different practices, many of which were in *The Next Right Thing* book at the end of the chapters. And I included some of them here, specifically the ones that were more conducive to reflection or writing things down. So those are sprinkled throughout the book, none of those practices are repeated they're just added to different months throughout the journal. So when you go to a season, you will see, first list is a look ahead list for that season and you can fill in what the season is however you decide to name it or if it's a season of the year, winter, spring, summer, fall. And there are just six categories there, there's travel, deadlines, celebrations, guests, and hosting community and family. And that's just a really basic jot down here, dates or big picture things that are coming up.

And this is again, it's not a planner, it's not something that you'll look at daily to see, what am I having going on this quarter? It's more just, as you settle into, okay, I'm going to think about this next three months at a time. What do I have coming up in the next three months? That's really what those two pages are for. The other seasonal spread is what I regret now calling, reflections for blank, whatever the season is, because this is the only place in the journal where the word reflection is actually meant to imply looking forward, which is kind of confusing because typically we talk about reflection being, looking backward, but these two pages is reflections for, whatever the season is coming ahead. And there are three simple prompts I want, I need and I hope.

I have had some people ask me, well, Emily what's the difference between what I want and need and what I hope for? And it's a good question and it's actually not, I don't know that it's one I can fully answer for you. I would just say, let yourself be free to explore that. And you might answer it one way this season and the next season, you might interpret those prompts differently. There is no wrong, you'll hear me repeat that a lot. And when you do answer these questions at the beginning of the season, it's just, number one, it's a way to get present to what's coming. And number two, it's a way to be aware of what might be hanging out, just beneath the surface of your desire of things that you actually need. It could be things you need in your body or in your schedule or in your family and things that you hope for.

And so many times we move through life unaware of what we want or what we need or hope for in a particular area of life. So this is just meant to be a simple exercise as we move forward into a season to just take a moment to maybe cast a bit of a hopeful vision in front of us, as we move forward. At the end of every season, I'm going to skip ahead a little bit just to share what is shared quarterly. So quarterly, you have your look ahead list, you have your reflections for that season, looking ahead and at the end of every season, you're prompted to answer what did I learn? What I learned this season and there's several pages

for you to be able to write down what did you learn? And again, there's no wrong here. I tend to write mine in an number style. I just write down number one, community doesn't have to be fancy or deep, but it's vital to my health and wellbeing. That's a true thing I learned in the winter season of this past year.

Number two, something else I learned, early Christmas shopping rules all, that was a reminder to myself. Hey, you love it when you shop early for Christmas, maybe do that again. So it's both practical things, it's sometimes lighthearted things and then sometimes it's really deep things that I want to remember. So that what I learned this season, there are four of those sections in the journal one for every three months. So as you go throughout your life, your days, you can jot down things you don't have to wait until the end of the quarter or the season to write those things down, but you can write them down as you go. Or it can be a practice that you build into your rhythm of life to look back over the last three months, the last season and jot down things that you've learned.

One of my favorite things to do at the beginning of every month is to write down on the months page in the journal, what month it is, and then there's a place for you to choose a quote for the month. And I get asked quite often, actually, where I choose my quotes from or how to find great quotes and I have zero good answers for this, because this is just something I've always done when I read. So I read a lot, I don't read fast, but I do read often. And as I do, I attend to, I don't really underline the books anymore, not because I'm opposed to it, but because it just takes too long. I tend to just put a little dot in the margin of my books and so when it's time to come to a new month, I'll go back through books I've been reading and I'll look for the dots. And I will usually choose a quote from one of those dots that I've already said, my past self tells my future self, "Hey, this resonated with you at the time." And usually that's where I'll pull my quotes from.

For example, one of my quotes for the month was from John O'Donohue's book *To Bless the Space Between Us*. Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention. That was my quote for the month back in December. And it was something that I just read throughout the month to remind myself that was something meaningful to me and it was something that I wanted to hold on to. So you'll have a quote page and a month page for every month in the guided journal. Just a quote you want to hang on to, and a reminder of where you are. One of the weekly lists in the journal is what I've called, these are the days list. Now, if you follow me on Instagram or if you've been around for any length of time, you've heard me use this phrase for years.

And I mean, obviously Emily P. Freeman did not come up with the phrase, these are the days of, but I use it a lot. And it's in the journal, I share on Instagram typically on Sunday nights, a couple of times a month, I'll just share what these are the days of. And it is literally the simplest thing ever. It is not fancy, it is, these are the days of meeting our neighbors outside, of real fires in the fireplace. These are the days of the first football game of the season. I usually do these and I date them, I tend to do these on the weekends and I will just write down bullet point style. There's only about 10 lines to write on for each week and so I don't put a lot there, but it is just a little glimpse of what's been going on this week.

So there's four of those for every month, so sometimes you have to ration your lines because some weeks, some months have four weeks or five weeks. So these are the days, is just a way to begin to name what's going on, what is happening in my right now life? What are these days made up of? Another list you'll find monthly in the guided journal is a list of gratitude. You do not need to sit down and write down what you're thankful for all at once, if it comes out that way, lovely, but you might want to return to this list over the course of the month and write down things as they come. Now, this is one of those lists that I look

at every morning. I read over what I wrote before, and I challenge myself to just write down one thing I'm grateful for that day.

Now, there isn't room to write down one thing per line, so the way I get around that, because there's only about 24 lines on that page. And if you do it every day, there's 31 days, math is, the today's math, you guys, you didn't know you're going to get math in The Next Right Thing podcast. But the way I solve that is I just do a little bullet point, like a little circle bullet point, between each thing I'm grateful for. And sometimes I'll have two or three on one line, but it's just an easy way to keep it all there on the page. Again, it doesn't have to be fancy. It doesn't have to be straight, it just needs to be written, seen, recorded, and honored. Another list, opposite of the gratitude list page, is a list of questions. Every decision begins as a question. And so the question for you is, so what questions do you have? What questions are you carrying into this month?

We're always carrying questions, which schooling choice is best for the kids or how can I care for my aging parents? Or is it time for us to move? Is it time for me to quit my job? How will I pay the bills when I don't have a job? What is the best time to make this business decision? All these questions, sometimes aren't even that clear as the ones I just listed, but a lot of them are. And those are the questions that you would want to write down in The Next Right Thing Journal. Every day we carry questions and we might not realize how many there are, so this list is a place to record them all in one place so that you can have a bird's eye view of some decisions you might have to make, which we don't often think of the questions that we're carrying as a future decision, but a lot of times they are.

And this is one list that is really important to me and it's one that I have, it's given me a lot of peace to be able to write down the question, because I know now that's a decision that I might have to make, or when I write it down, I realize Emily, that's an unanswerable question, but it helps me to record it anyway. Another list that I have talked about extensively here on the podcast, as well as in my real life, as well as on Instagram and wherever you might find me is a life energy list. And that's where I ask myself two questions and I invite you to do that as well. What was life draining this month and what was life giving this month? This is another one of those lists that I don't just sit down and write it all at once usually. I tend to, as I'm going throughout my days or weeks, and I come across something that I really loved, or I come across something that I desperately did not love, I'll jot it down on these lists.

Now, this year in the month of July, I took a break from, not everything, but from a lot of things. And so I tried to have a time of intentional rest and vacation and so I challenged myself to write down a couple of things almost every day on my life giving list. I wanted to have enough things to record on my life giving list, which meant I had to do things that were life giving. And so that summer, when I look at my life giving lists from the month of July, it's super fun. I have reading fiction and cleaning the kitchen. I know that sounds weird, but when you have time to clean the kitchen and you enjoy your kitchen, then when it's clean, it's like super life giving, rocket science. A long walk in the morning by the lake, near our house, coffee with my friend Melissa, organizing my Google Drive. Y'all I didn't say it had to make sense for everybody, I just think it has to make sense for you. So those are some of the things in my life giving list.

Emily P. Freeman:

And what that does for you later on, as you reflect back, as you're trying to make decisions about your time and your schedule and what you're going to do next, it can be helpful to remember the things that are life giving, because if you don't write them down, sometimes we just forget. That is just the fact of being

a grown human in this world. But the same is true for what was life draining. And sometimes y'all, I just have to put down parenting or being a person is life draining and sometimes just validating, just to do that. So that life draining list will do the same thing for you that your life giving list will do and it will help you make decisions moving forward about things that might be on your list of questions or things that help you determine what your next right thing might be.

That leads us to one of my favorite lists, which is a list of arrows. There are 12 of these lists in the journal, again, one for every month. When we have questions, it's natural to want answers, but instead, if you pay attention, what we usually get are arrows instead, not a full answer, but maybe just one next right thing. So this list is intended to be almost a response to your list of questions. Again, you have a question, sometimes you can name, okay, what is an action I can take or a next right thing I can do as a result of that question? But sometimes it's unclear, but this list of arrows is a place that I usually, I tend to wait to the end of the month to write these down. But this is the most, probably the most actionable list in your journal.

This is going to be the one that you're like, okay, I've named my questions, I've named what's life giving, what's life draining, I've named what I'm grateful for, I've been carrying a quote around this month, I'm aware of the life I'm living, I know what these days are filled with. And so in light of all that, as I consider my family and my faith and my person, my energy, what might be one next right thing I could do? As I consider the questions I've been carrying, are there any arrows emerging? Sometimes these are as simple as make that doctor's appointment or email Kendra. No, that's not right, I never email Kendra. What am I saying? Vox, Kendra, about whatever question I have, but this is a place just to get really practical about, okay, I might not have an answer, but do I have just one next right thing I can do? The list of arrows is where you record those things.

One of the most happy lists in the book is called a happy list. It was aptly named. And this is where you can record things that you've read this month, things that you've watched, things you've listened to that were meaningful or that you want to remember and things that you made and now remember made, things you've made doesn't mean you had to make a scarf or make a meal. Although of course, those things count, but you might've also made an apology, you might've made a decision, you might've made a fool of yourself. Whatever the thing might be, although I would not recommend writing, I made a fool of myself on your happy list because this is a happy list after all. But it is always fun for me and this just might be me again, you can make these things, anything you want them to be. If you want to record something different, cross my words out and write your own.

But I like to record, for example, things that we watched as a family, which there are so few things we watch as a family these days, but it defines the season like, oh, remember that year when we all watched Alias? Yes I do, it was when John and I were dating and it was super fun, but I mean, I'm saying Alias, when it came on the first time, now we all can relive that life that we lived. Are you loving the fact that I am riffing this walkthrough? You are welcome and I am sorry, sorry for the rambling. Let's get back on track. Well, those are all the main lists within the journal. We walked through them and I shared some of my thoughts about them. In the back of your journal, there are several more lists to record, I'm going to share with you some behind the scenes stuff.

There's one list called, what I learned this year, and in the editing process, I think I told them wrong about how to lay this one out. It was intended to be several pages with a heading at the top and instead

the headings about halfway down the page with not very many lines. Let me tell you, there is not enough room to write on that page in your journal, what you learned this year. If you can do it, I would love a picture and you show it to me because I would be so impressed. So there's always regrets when it comes to publishing and this is one of my regrets is I wish I would have caught that because there's just not enough room to write everything that you learned, but there is a space to maybe jot down some highlights.

Same goes for a page of books you read this year. Now, I've already filled my page up of all the books I've read this year in there and I've had to go to the next page, but I just might record, I might either write smaller or use my, what worked for me in the last 12 months page to also write the books on. And that's another list that's in here. So you can have a place to record all the books you read, if you want to do that and there's also a couple of places to put what worked for you this year and what did not work for you this year. Now, again, when it says this year, it can just mean the last 12 months, it doesn't have to be January to December. In the back of your journal, you find some resources where we linked to different topical episodes from The Next Right Thing podcast, that could help you use the journal even more effectively for your own life.

There's also some headings of different decisions that you might have to make, there's also 10 questions to help you make a decision listed in the back, as well as some recommended reading. I have said a lot of words, I hope that for those of you who have a lot of questions about journalings or specifically this journal, I hope this has been helpful for you. A little walkthrough, a little talk through, The Next Right Thing, Guided Journals, so that if you're going to pick it up in September as the school year starts, or if you're planning to start it at the New Year, I hope this will be a kind companion for you moving forward. The most important thing to say here, really, as we close is the most important thing for you is not a perfectly made decision, is there even a such thing? Making the right decision, we all want that, it's not always possible. We do our best with what we know and sometimes upon reflection, we realize we wish we would've done things differently.

And I know saying that this isn't really about making the right decision, that feels a little bit dangerous, and I'm certainly not advocating that wise decisions don't matter. But the most important thing is the people we're becoming, the most important thing is that you know beyond doubts, shadow or shames point of finger, that you are loved, that you are seen and that you're not alone. The most important thing in this whole, and I'll go ahead and say, in this whole journaling process, it's not just for journaling sake, it's not even the outcome of the decisions you make, but it's the transformation that happens within you in the process. And so much of that transformation happens not as we force and push and demand and try to figure things out, but as we recognize our right now life, the people with us in it that we are not alone.

As we recognize that there are some things in life that are beyond us, there's a lot, we can't control. There are answers that we will never find and questions that just don't lend themselves well to answers, but there's still a hope and a love that is given and not earned and not strategized and not forced. I hope that if you enter into this rhythm of life, of using this guided journal or another journal, I hope that that practice will help you, not only learn more of yourself, maybe learn more of God, of God in you and God with you. And also, I hope that this practice will help you discern your next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 189 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of reflection 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.

As always you can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or @emilypfreeman.com. And if you haven't picked up a copy of The Next Right Thing Guided Journal yet, I hope you do. You can start, like I said, at the beginning of any month and name your seasons however you want. You can find it from a link in the show notes, from my website or anywhere books are sold. Well, in closing, I'll share my July quote for the month from Parker J. Palmer in his book, A Hidden Wholeness, courage comes as we understand that no punishment anyone might inflict on us could possibly be worse than the punishment we inflict on ourselves by living a divided life. Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.