



## 191: What We're Learning

In the words of Jan Johnson and John Dewey. And I'm sure many others, it's not the experience that brings transformation, it's our reflection upon our experience. I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 191. 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. Listen in.

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Oprah Winfrey calls it one of her most embarrassing moments when film critic, Gene Siskel asked her on live TV, so what do you know for sure? And she did not have an answer. After that, Oprah did a lot of thinking about the things she knows for sure. And this is often a question that she asks other people. That story inspired me years ago to ask myself that same question. What do I know for sure? Now this was many, many years ago when I used to join in with other writers who had blogs and we would share 31 days of writing on a particular topic. And I thought, hey, this is it. I'm going to write for 31 days about what I know for sure. That's only 31 things. I can't wait to get started. And then I got started. I could not come up with even a week's worth. It was the for sure bit that tripped me up because I could come up with a list of a lot of things I know. But when you add that little part, for sure, the list gets a bit smaller.

Now I'll pause and say, there are some things I know for sure. And maybe I could even list 31 of them now. I know for sure that John loves me, but that doesn't guarantee that he's not going to leave me. I mean, I don't suspect that's happening, but I can't know that for sure. I know for sure The Wizard of Oz is the greatest movie of all time, and that I have too many bags and also too many shoes. I know for sure I don't like key lime pie. Do not try to negotiate with me on this. But beyond love and preferences, I found this for sure list, a complicated list to keep, I guess for sure, implies it's something that will never, ever change. And while there are things about my faith and life with God that I want to say, I'm sure about, and I think I am, I also know that part of faith and having faith in a childlike way is sometimes a belief in trust, even though things don't always make sense.

And so I prefer a different posture or at least a different frame. Instead of what I know for sure, I've been asking myself since 2014, what am I learning? And I've been keeping a list. This is a friendly fluid list to keep, as you pay attention to your life. It allows room for you to hold experiences in your hands, walk around with them, ask questions and sometimes set them down and consider if it's time to leave them behind. This list can include anything you're learning about anything. It can be silly, simple, or even

sacred. Keeping a list like this on a regular basis reminds me I'm not just doing things, I'm becoming someone.

And so for years, I've been inviting readers to join me in this simple practice of naming and recording what we're learning. We've done this collectively and communally for many years, and I've tried different ways to share this for a long time. I had a link up on my blog. Do you remember those? Where people would put in their link and they would all collect in one place on a blog post every month. I did that for a while, we tried to hashtag for a while. But even though I don't necessarily have an organized way for us all to share what we're learning every month or every season, some of you have continued to do it. And I love seeing these end of month reflections like Beth and Sarah from Pantsuit Politics. They share their lists at the end of every month.

Sarah Holland shared on the Pantsuit Politics Instagram account at the end of August that she learned, "There's no blessing like the blessing of freshly painted walls. And nail polish is an excellent activity for middle schoolers. And South Africa has 11 official languages." Fun facts and some preferences. Things she's learning, but would we put those things on a things I know for sure list? I don't know. I don't know if they would fit there, but they definitely fit in a, what I'm learning list. It's personal, it might be a little quirky, it might be a little fun and it's definitely reflective.

Well, her business partner, Beth Silvers shared at the end of July that she learned she was exhausted writing, and this is a quote from Beth, "I love to work and I love this particular work that I have the privilege to do. I've just been exhausted, like pretty much every other human I know from worry and analysis and trying to make everything okay, even when it feels exceptionally not okay, and too damn much laundry." She writes, "I'm also learning that things don't have to be greater or lesser in comparison to others to exist and need attention." Amen to that.

Finally, Annie B. Jones owner of an independent bookstore in Thomasville, Georgia shares on Instagram what she learned in August. She writes, "Trust other people to celebrate well. You don't have to be in charge. And create warm and welcoming spaces where people can be joy-filled in their work, yes, but do it for your own happiness too." And one of my favorite things she learned in August, "God is in breezes and babbling creeks, the roaring silence of a wave. He's in stained glass and wood floors too, but it's okay if he's easier for you to hear in the wind." Thank you for those words, Annie. And thank you for taking the time Annie, Sarah, and Beth, for reflecting on your own life and writing those things down, the things you're learning so that we can learn too.

Over the years, this practice has helped me name some things that have been defining moments in my own life. Like in the fall of 2014, I wrote down tiny red flags only get bigger. This advice came from my friend, Holly, who told me this years ago when I asked for her advice about a speaking engagement, I wasn't sure if I should take or not. And she said, "If you have hesitations at the beginning of something, tiny red flags don't get it smaller. They only grow." I have found this advice to be true over and over again. And this continues to be a guiding principle for decision-making for me, both personally and professionally. I'm so glad I took the time to write it down.

Another one in the summer of 2020. When in doubt, love. In the midst of the writing, the anger, the injustice, the confusion of last summer, I read a post by my friend Caitlin, and it reminded me of the power of love in the midst of all kinds of struggles, both the struggles of everyday life, like daily parenting

and my inability to answer my kids' really hard questions and the regular mess-ups, as well as in the bigger conversations that we're having as communities and as a culture, I'm reminded of the power of love. In the midst of not knowing last summer, what the next literal minute will hold and not knowing if we were doing this whole thing right, I'm reminded of the power, the call, the invitation to love.

In reflecting on that post that Caitlin wrote, which I'll link to in the show notes, I was reading a book by Henri Nouwen called *In The Name of Jesus*. And so, because I had been thinking about and reflecting on the invitation to love this quote stood out. "Power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God. Easier to control people than to love people. Easier to own life than to love life."

A few months before that, in the spring of 2020 something I wrote down on my what I'm learning list, Sidecar Donuts makes the best donut I have ever had. Now, maybe this is insignificant to you, but if you're in Southern California, it most certainly is not. On March 6th, 2020, I was there on the last day of the last trip I took before the stay at home orders were in place, and I tasted a Sidecar doughnut for the first time. This pandemical situation had distracted me for a very long time from this memory. But when I reflected back over my last several months when I made this list, and I saw the pictures I took of the donuts, I remembered, and I was so grateful to remember that. You see why the spiritual discipline of reflection is so important.

Another thing I wrote down that I learned in the summer of 2019, I know I've heard from God when I don't feel ashamed and I'm not afraid. Now that was my takeaway. It was inspired by a quote in the book, *When the Soul Listens* by Jan Johnson. And she was quoting spiritual director, Myrna Craig, who said, "I know I've heard from God when I don't feel guilty and I'm not afraid." But for me, that idea of shame has been something that I have been paying close attention to because I think that is the trap. And the word for me, that resonates most when I'm in shame or feeling shame, that's when I know for sure this is not from God. And so that was something that was really meaningful for me. Something to write down, to think if I'm feeling motivated by a sense of shame, then that's really not how the spirit speaks. Now, might I feel a sense of conviction or compulsion to apologize or to change or to repent? Absolutely. But I don't think that's cloaked in shame. I just don't believe that's the way God works.

And finally, another quote that I remembered and wrote down on my what I learned list, this one from my list in the fall of 2017. "The flourishing of the vulnerable depends on the vulnerability of the flourishing." That one's from Andy Crouch. Amen to that.

This list reminds me, I'm not just doing things. I am becoming someone. And so are you. So who are you becoming? And what are you learning along the way? Maybe in the end, the list of what I'm learning ends up being a list of things I know for sure. But I'll tell you for me, what I'm learning is a friendlier list to make. And it's all about paying attention. In the words of Elizabeth Dreyer in her book, *Earth Crammed with Heaven*. "In a profound way, our intentionality is a key ingredient determining whether we notice God everywhere, or only in church, or only in suffering or nowhere. It all depends on how we choose to fashion our world."

So what about you? What have you learned this season? What if you wrote it down and reviewed it often? Oh God, may we learn to be people who pay attention to our lives so that we can see how you are everywhere all the time. May we be not only observers, but participants in your divine life, as we do our

next right thing in love. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Thanks for listening to episode 191 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of naming what you've learned can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman or online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com), where you can find a transcript of this and every episode, just click the word podcast at the top of the page. If you want to receive my quarterly list of things I'm learning, I send those out in my monthly letter, just visit [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter), or click the link in the show notes.

Technically I should have sent my what I learned this summer list out at the end of August, but alas, I did not. So you still have time if you'd like to get that list. I'll be sending it out at the end of the week. Again, that's at [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter). You'll get a letter every month and every third month is when I share a list of what I've learned that season.

Well, in closing, something I learned in the fall of 2018 from writer Lauren Winner. She said at a conference from the stage and I wrote it down like a mad woman, "The world is a basket of clues about what the kingdom of God is like." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.