



194: Being Human with Kate Bowler

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right thing. You're listening to episode 194. 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 is sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, a simple next right step and sometimes a conversation.

My guest today believed that life was a series of unlimited choices until she discovered at aged 35, that her body was racked with cancer. In the years that follow Kate Bowler has wrestled, honestly, with the reality that she's been handed and the terrible advice she's received along the way, like that everything happens for a reason. Hers is a voice I never want to stop listening to and in her new book *No Cure for Being Human*, she's honest, vulnerable, and delightfully human. Saying the words we all know but are sometimes afraid to say, that life is beautiful and terrible, full of hope and despair and everything in between. I'm delighted to sit down with Kate to talk about that and the truths we all need to hear. Listen in.

Emily: All right, Kate, I was at a birthday dinner a few weeks ago and I mentioned that I was going to be talking with you on the podcast. And it was so fun to be able to say and one of my friends who was there, she was not familiar with your work. And so I immediately launched into, oh, well, what I claimed was one of my favorite things about you, not that you are a brilliant writer, which you are, or that you have taught me the importance of embracing both the good and the terrible things about my right now life, which you have. But instead my introduction of you to her was that you dip into this really funny Dory the fish voice, when you start having your dark humor. And it's one of my favorite things. And then I realized horrified. I'm like, "But she's also a New York times bestselling author and she's also really smart. She doesn't just sound like Dory the fish."

Kate Bowler:

Oh no, no. I think anyone that feels so special to me that you're like, "There are moments where she has no dignity," and I agree. I think that's the only good place to start. And I'm never terribly good with formal people. So I just really appreciate your openness to just a deep inappropriateness. Thank you.

Emily P. Freeman:

Just deeply right at the top that I have Kate with me who also has an amazing Dory the fish esque way about her when she's being funny slash kind of morbid, so I'm really glad that we have gotten that out of

the way here at the top.

Kate Bowler:

I feel known. Thank you.

Emily P. Freeman:

I'm so glad. Well, speaking of jumping right in I would love to do that with you and let's just do it. Is there for you Kate, a most common response when people hear that you are living with stage four cancer?

Kate Bowler:

Well, it's mostly a face that I came to recognize during the first six months of church during like the passing of the piece. I could always tell who knew and they're like, "Oh," and the head just tilts to the side and there's just a sad Cocker Spaniel look. And then usually it goes, well, it depends... People either choose to go purely informational, "Oh, what kind?" And then they're just walking a gentle line to the question, "Is it going to kill you?"

Kate Bowler:

Which they're trying so hard not to ask, but they will. Or they're just rushing to some very sweet, upsetting fear management strategy where they're just trying to lovingly figure out why it was why it was me not them. And I don't mean for that to sound unkind. I think the world is just full of really scary things. And when we hear something new we're trying to put it in a place in our own minds and hearts and when we hear sad stories it does give us a bit of a jolt. But I didn't used to be a sad story. I've only recently become better at children's birthday parties in which I don't like lead with the honesty quite as much.

Emily P. Freeman:

Leading with the honesty. It's one of those where, like you said, in passing of the peace, which how much peace has really passed in those moments, whose piece is it? Because it is something that we all feel so deeply responsible for things being comfortable.

Kate Bowler:

Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

And you come in and disrupt that for us.

Kate Bowler:

That is such a lovely way of putting it though. I think that's right of especially women, there's so much, I'm not a person, I'm a comfort management strategy. I come in making sure that whatever I'm bringing into the room, I'm making sure everyone feels okay about it, which is why we have these voices sometimes and calming hands. Partly it's just being a historian and I love thinking about cultural scripts and then I love thinking about how to break them. And then I think that's also just what I love about other people, is when they're able to enter into a place that lets you know that you're allowed to break the rules for a second.

Emily P. Freeman:

I listen to you read your book, everything happens for a reason and you read it to me. Thank you

very much for that personal reading slash your audio book, but you read it to me. I left my house in Greensboro, North Carolina. I drove to my sister's house in Charlotte. I listened to it the whole time. And then when I got back in my car in Charlotte to come home the next day you read me back home. And the final line of your book, it was as if I was in a movie because as I pulled into my driveway, you were reading the last line of the last chapter of the book.

Kate Bowler:
Oh my gosh.

Emily P. Freeman:
I'm curious if you remember what that last line was?

Kate Bowler:
Oh, yes, because it was almost something else. It was almost a funny thing about my son, Zach, because he is just the center of what I know to be the most love and the most source of fear, which is, "I want to be your mom." But I switched it to, "I will die. Yes. But not today." That kind of helped launch me forward, I guess, outside of just that place of fear.

Emily P. Freeman:
That line stuck with me for days. And even now it sticks with me because it's true of all of us and you shared so vulnerably your story with us with great humor, if listener, dear listener, if you have not recognized that yet. So much humor, but so much care and almost you wrote this and I'm speaking of Everything happens for a reason. I know you have another book out as well that I can't wait to have in my hands, but you almost write in a pastoral way, even though I know you are a historian, I know that you are professor, I know that you're a comedian.

Kate Bowler:
Daytime historian, nighttime stand up.

Kate Bowler:
The pastoral tone is weird, because it requires that we imagine for a second that we're, I don't know, learning something that we might want to share. And I think before that I was totally socialized out of... gosh, I would only give advice to my good friends. But I think the second I got very sick, it was such a deep humbler for me. I realized there wasn't a tomorrow that I needed to sort of... Well, because I had had this sort of rich imagination for the like academic future I would have. And there was like a turret involved and like a whole fleet of just like... Imagine feudalism, but I'm the benevolent overlord and like wine and cheese.

Kate Bowler:
I really imagined that respectability was primarily the thing that would govern the rules of my life. And then I was so lonely, honestly being sick and feeling like every I went I was being explained. Everything happens for a reason, or I must be learning lessons or that kind of thing. I realized I needed to access a more honest way of talking or else I was going to die very politely, just very gently. So I've been trying something else, it feels a little bossy, frankly, but I'm giving it a whirl.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, when it comes to that line and how I've carried it with me, I just have thought about how, yes, it's true of you, it's also true of me, it's true of all of us. It's deeply leveling that line and I'm curious just when I think about that as a writer, I think about that as a human, but I also think about it as a writer and I'm curious just for you, are there any lines that you've read over the years or maybe ones that you've written, that have struck you so deeply that have just almost become a part of you that you rehearse or carry in your mind?

Kate Bowler:

That's such a fun question. I've got a couple that are not very theologically correct, but I will tell him to you anyway. But there's this line in *The Road* the Cormac McCarthy book about an apocalyptic future. It's really just mostly a book about how much this dad can't imagine not being a father to his kid. And then he's looking at this little boy and I think of his perspective, when I think of the slope of my son's neck and the little fuzzy hairs that they have and their inappropriately long eyelashes, he's got this line where he says, "If that boy hid the word of God, then God never spoke."

Kate Bowler:

And it is wildly heretical because we're not supposed to deify our families, that was something that we've all been trying not to do as parents, but it's just something about the feeling of natural revelation that God appears in other people and then just shocks us by how we can't imagine ourself as not constituted, like somehow constituted and spoken to by the people we love. I feel that way when I look at my kid with his giant head.

Emily P. Freeman:

When you wrote *Everything Happens For A Reason*, can you share with us what was... This is *The Next Right Thing*, we talk about making decisions and decision making and discernment, which my next question is about that. But first just your own thought process in deciding to write that book, what your mindset was and then maybe comparing or contrasting that with your mindset in this most recent book that you've written *No Cure For Being Human*.

Kate Bowler:

I had written this very long academic book, like the kind of book that I'm so excited when it sells out the 500 library copies and it took me 10 years to write. And so I was really proud of it but it was a very dense academic history of the prosperity gospel, that belief that God wants to give you health and wealth and happiness. And I had tried so hard to be really kind in the way that I had framed it as a movement, that's not just driven by like the greed of a televangelist who wants a private plane, but as something that has its own reasons, that somebody has a vision of a certain kind of faith. So a faith that's spoken aloud and activated and that they can draw good things into their life and that they will be blessed in some way so I called the book *Blessed*.

Kate Bowler:

I felt like it did what I wanted to do, I wanted to set a gentle conversation, but then there was all kinds of stuff that it couldn't do because it was an academic history. It couldn't have that feeling that I have sometimes at 2:00 AM, when I remembered that I was sick again and wanted to scream. I just wanted to say... I know it sounds like total hubris to say, "Why is this happening to me?" but, "Why is this happening at all?" And I needed a place to be honest in a way that I didn't realize I didn't have another place to be. I had imagined that honesty was something you do with your close friends and your family and the people

who love and trust you.

Kate Bowler:

But I found that those are the people I lied to the most because they needed to be okay and I needed them to be okay. So I needed some place else to wrestle some ideas to the ground and to be... And the main question that I was trying to figure out is why is it that suffering means that I'm suddenly a problem to be solved? Why is it that when people are so surprised that pain comes to my dare step, when just like you were saying it could come to anyone's door. And there was just the question, that big theodicy question, which is not just why does evil happen, but what do we do when it shows up in our own life and takes our world apart. And that writing turns out is just what a gift, what a joy just to be able to do, to have a place to be that.

Kate Bowler:

I felt like I could write my way into something so painful or true or funny, I was hoping that I couldn't have said it out loud. So that was me grappling with life as a crisis. And then I began to try to figure out this question I realized that I kept having, because I kept living, thank God, which was, what do you do when the life you have is not the one you would've chosen, but you have to find a way to move forward. And how do you manage life as a chronic condition and not just a crisis. And so that's kind of, I thought for a bit, honestly, that I was trying to write a book about time like what do you do if you've got a number of days?

Kate Bowler:

And I realized, "Oh, no, I'm just trying to understand finitude." What happens when what we have isn't always... when enoughness is the question of the day, what would ever feel like enough when we've got so many beautiful, lovely, true things that we're all trying to live for all the time.

Emily P. Freeman:

How long has it been since your initial diagnosis?

Kate Bowler:

It's been a bit, almost six years. It was two years of full... I like to think of Smokey the Bear, it was full on red, full on bananasville, Smokey the Bear is like, "No one can have fires near you, this is dangerous." I've gone up and down between yellow and orange now, ever since. I guess that's the feeling is, "I'm almost a normal person." I've seen this so much in the pandemic as I think we all have, which is how do you right size the relationship, your relationship to fear when we don't get to have the certainties, the illusion of certainties that we once had.

Emily P. Freeman:

That is such a great question that is maybe unanswerable, but it's such an important question to hold. And I think this idea of and I've heard you say this, that the decisions we make lead to the outcomes we want is sometimes true and often untrue.

Kate Bowler:

Yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

And one of the ways that I just describe The Next Right Thing podcast is that this is a podcast about

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making decisions and also about making a life. And this can be misconstrued by some to imply that if we could just make good decisions then we will ultimately live a good life.

Kate Bowler:

Yes, that's right.

Emily P. Freeman:

And I hear from listeners literally all the time in my DMs and my email and then sometimes in person who are so afraid of making the wrong decisions, that it often keeps them either from making any decision at all or from just overthinking so much and regret. So I'm just curious from your very unique standpoint, can you relate it all to this chronic hesitation or have you been healed of all that?

Kate Bowler:

No, no, never. Oh my gosh. There was a minute there in crisis land where I was like, "Screw it." It was that wonderful bulldozer feeling.

Emily P. Freeman:

Sure.

Kate Bowler:

I got up in a professional lunch and just walked away, Emily it was freedom. And then the feeling of constraint came back. But absolutely is, I think what we both just are so hopeful about is the desire to create that space between that feeling like, "Oh, nothing is possible," and people collapse into either fear or indecision and then they're just stuck. And yet we want to steer people away from that unbelievably American hyper agency where they think like, "Life is a series of choices and I just need to choose right and if I choose right then I get et cetera, et cetera," which is of course another kind of prosperity gospel.

Kate Bowler:

And it's not our fault, it's modernity and it's a disease, but we all got it. And unfortunately we have to live with that. So finding that place of limited agency, I think it's such a tender place to try to occupy because we're always going to veer depending on what time of day it is from one to the other.

Emily P. Freeman:

Absolutely.

Kate Bowler:

I am wholeheartedly with you. I think just trying to find enough space to ask ourselves, where everything is possible or nothing is possible, but just what is possible today. It's Prudential wisdom, it's the ability to discern and that feels like the... what a pure wisdom that we all hope for.

Emily P. Freeman:

I imagine that, so almost like a dropping in deeper than a decision making it's that discernment place it's like the second question, it's like the truth beneath the truth. And I think that's really ultimately what I hope having a next right thing posture does for people, does for me, is yes, what is just my next right thing? Because I don't know my next five right things or if there will be five next things, but just keeping it in this moment.

Kate Bowler:

Yes. And to get there it sounds like you've had to do that hard, horrible thing, which is surrender the certainty that if you just pick everything right that it creates a straight path. I think we all just get so little... the lamp lights so few steps in front of us and we're always so grateful when somebody's like, "Oh no, no, no pick the not dumb thing. Pick the pick the slightly less selfish thing."

Emily P. Freeman:

Right. Right.

Kate Bowler:

Like, "Oh, that sounds right."

Emily P. Freeman:

"And I'll tell you exactly what it is and the three steps to get there," it's like, that's not real but I wish it was, I fall for it.

Kate Bowler:

I would love it, if it were true, it would be wonderful and I would purchase it and on a subscription plan for sure. One of the things I do regular early in that is I do know that when I'm in seasons where I'm really scared and right now this is a scary season for all of us, is that fear does have an amazing way of shining a light on what we love is helping us remember the things we can't live without. And then just trying to find a little more peace and rest in that, that we do get the insane privilege of loves that are so upsetting that we're worried that we'll live without them and thank God for that.

Emily P. Freeman:

Amen sister. Well, you mentioned a minute ago about the fact that you are a historian of the American prosperity gospel. And so you know better than most about the ways in which we try to control our lives and yet we can sometimes call that living by faith.

Kate Bowler:

Yes, yes, yes.

Emily P. Freeman:

Which is very confusing. But it's like we can somehow believe our way, "If I just have the right way of believing then it's going to lead to blessing." Which is a scary thing to say in a conversation like this because you know I'm going to negate it. It's like, "No," but yes that. But I'm just curious in your years of studying the prosperity gospel, which it sounds like there were many, what was one of your biggest takeaways that has actually influenced how you live your life for better or worse?

Kate Bowler:

There was a lovely thing I learned from just spending so long with prosperity believers and then there was a thing I try to remind myself of, I guess the love lovely thing was people have a certain mindset where they live with expectation. They live believing that God is good and loves them intimately and cares about all the little details of their life. I found that to be such a lovely reminder that though I don't want to be the person who hyper assigns causality to my life, that I do love seeing things as gifts, like actual gifts, not

just things I earned and paid for. Things that feel like you get a moment of transcendence where you're like... Sometimes it's just like, "Holy crap, a rainbow," but sometimes it's just, "Holy crap, the magic of people, we get to sit here and make magic by knowing and caring about each other."

Kate Bowler:

That kind of mindset did really open up the world a little bit for me, it makes me believe in a certain kind of magic, which I love. But did also teach me that we have too many intellectual strains that run through our culture that lead us to over inflate the power of our minds. We are so worried about not keeping a positive mindset or having a certain kind of faith or expectation or belief that we have... it comes from the late 19th century, I could give a whole PowerPoint on it. But the truth is it's an overemphasis on just one part of who we are, that we are also heart and spirit and body and zillion other and our biology and our culture and our context and what happened that day. And so when we imagine our minds as these bulldozers, we have accidentally freighted ourselves with just too much weight.

Kate Bowler:

So I think we can need to open up our permission to be able to have like a... I always think of it like a wider aperture to let in the light and the dark, but it will lead us to honesty. And then honesty gives us a lot more solid footing if we can just say, "Wow, today, really could have gone better."

Emily P. Freeman:

Wow. That's good. Well, speaking of honesty, and by the way I'm so grateful that you said that about the over-emphasis on the mind because we love the mind. I love the mind. I think when it comes to decision making and discernment, we have been taught that the mind is key and only. When in fact we have, like you said, hearts and intuition and all these things work together to help us make wholehearted decisions to help us move wholeheartedly forward. When it comes to being honest, I read that you said we lose things all the time that we're not going to get back, but does that mean things can't be good, beautiful and true. And I'm curious for you, if you're willing to share, what have you lost that you're not going to get back.

Kate Bowler:

Well, I'll give you my super honest answer, which is I've lost so much of the body I thought I'd have, I just had to have so many surgeries and a lot of side effects and a lot of hospital hours and that took a lot of things, it took the ability to have the family I imagined. I don't have the climb every mountain, there's a song about that, body. And so I live with a lot of chronic limitations and that is not my favorite, that is something I have to grieve when I realize that I can't, I can't always have the life I imagined. So I try to be a little bit more honest with that than I would otherwise, honestly, Emily, right now I just feel like lying to you. But then I learned this I think my life would've been pretty great if I hadn't had stage four cancer, I think it would've been pretty lovely.

Kate Bowler:

So I think there's a hope that people want to and then they're trying to give it to you like a gift, but they're trying to say, "Well, since you've learned all these things, isn't there some kind of invisible math that makes that okay." And I think it makes me feel less bananas when I think that there's just no perfect math to figure out how we add up our lives, we're just moving forward always trying to figure out what can feel like enough.

Emily P. Freeman:

It's really difficult to take off trying to see the world through lesson colored glasses. And when we can't see the lesson it begins to haunt us like, "Well, there has to be a reason because if there's not, then I'm in big trouble here."

Kate Bowler:

Then why did I go through this, couldn't it have been... It's such a natural feeling, especially if you're in pain, I'm just thinking of labor pain right now. But if you're in pain for even a minute, you're like, "When is this over? What good thing is going to come out of it?" We need it to be for something and then we end up saying insane things to each other like, "Oh, nothing is lost." That's wild. It's just a wild thing to say. People lose things all the time. If you don't have more cultural language for that, I think we're asking a lot of people who are widows or have lost kids or are losing things in the pandemic or have lost homes or dreams or jobs. We're asking them to pretend that the future will always make up for the past and that's the only math they can believe in, I think that's just not true.

Emily P. Freeman:

So what do you say to the person I'll play Jane listener who says, "Okay. Things are lost. Okay. But now what? What do I do about that, Kate?"

Kate Bowler:

Yes. Well, I have a plan and it is a good one, come to my house. I've only a couple truly deeply held beliefs about if and how things can be okay and here's a couple of them. I believe that even as we lose things, things that we mourn that there are little moments of gift and beauty, they're little breadcrumbs, scattered, not just in the present and not just in the future, but in our past as memories that remind us that we are loved, that we will be loved and that somehow in there is a very special kind of being held. And I know lots of people who are not okay right now and they can't be okay on their own, and so maybe some of that is also giving up on our story about individualism and that we were ever going to be okay by ourselves.

Kate Bowler:

I have a very strong flying buttresses theory about my life, which is that this is not a low bearing building. I am going to come apart. And I don't mean that even in a cute way, it's going to be like, this thing might come down and I cannot make my life work without other people scaffolding me from the outside in. And I truly hate it, I'm such a individualist, like interdependence is part of how we become okay, as we human life raft each other out of this because all of us are delicate and that is part of our beauty and that is part of what makes it so scary to be a person.

Emily P. Freeman:

It's so scary to be a person. And we are relentless in our desire to be told what to do and how to do it so that we can be okay and live our "Best life now," TM. And you have just so beautifully answered how we move forward with the life we didn't choose. And you most beautifully answered it, we do it together, that's how we do it. And it is not formulaic and it is not a great framework for anything really.

Kate Bowler:

It's a terrible self-help book, isn't it?

Emily P. Freeman:
It's terrible.

Kate Bowler:
We're both doing very bad self-help work.

Emily P. Freeman:
We are. We're going to get a call from our publishers next-

Kate Bowler:
That's right.

Emily P. Freeman:
... right after this.

Kate Bowler:
This won't sell you have to give people a plan and I think this is why we're as stuck as we are, as we are inundated with a self-help mindset and it makes us worry that we're not... one, we don't have what it, what it takes, all the hustle, all the get up and go, all the indestructibility that other people seem to have. And I don't have it and I think it's okay, I really think it's okay if we don't. I think that moving forward, it really does require courage, it requires that me move forward without is knowing that there's enough. And it requires hope in people that this is a story about God, it's a story about us. And it's a story about how somehow in there that we pour into one another the things that we need to move on. I think we're just going to have to always unfortunately need hope and courage, otherwise this would be a wonderful story of self-sufficiency wouldn't it.

Emily P. Freeman:
Which I would much prefer, thank you very much.

Kate Bowler:
Me too. Me too. Me too. That's the story I want, honestly, I wish you could tell me that you always knew it was going to be okay if I just did these things. And I love the fact that you're giving people with such generosity, to just find those bits of wisdom that help us move forward when we can't go back.

Emily P. Freeman:
One bit of wisdom that you say there's no cure for being human, but we are all good medicine. That's a Kate Bowler original, but I would love to hear from your mouth, more words about that kind of in closing before I ask my final question. But what does it look like to be good medicine?

Kate Bowler:
I think part of it is we recognize each other's precarity, I think that's my favorite word, the delicate way that we're constituted. We volunteer without having to just be conscripted into love, we show up with dumb presence and food or just compliments. I think all of us just really need compliments right now, frankly. And we genuinely understand that the solutions will always be both individual and structural, there's just no individuating our way to the just and kind resources that we all need. Like I need great health insurance, the solution is both personal, please give me food, but also structural. And I love when people can hold those two things together that we are all a group project.

Emily P. Freeman:

All right Kate final question. What is your next right thing?

Kate Bowler:

It's just been a bit of a scary season. It's just been a scary season. I've had a lot of health, drama and pandemic, et cetera. I don't know if you've heard of this, but there's this pandemic it's been very stressful.

Emily P. Freeman:

There's this plague happening?

Kate Bowler:

It's not getting the press it deserves, but it's this whole plague. And I think I need to right size my fear right now. I need to realize that people really want to be there, and when I can't do it by myself that's the beginning of a good thought for me, that I'm going to need to ask for help.

Emily P. Freeman:

Amen sister.

Kate Bowler:

And then I won't Emily and then you'll have to call me and talk me into it, so I'm just going to give you my number and you can leave a message.

Emily P. Freeman:

That's good. Well, I had a professor once say, "Jesus when he ascended he didn't leave behind a book, he left behind a community." And man, if they weren't just a mess of a people, I would not have done it that way. Had I been asked-

Kate Bowler:

That's right here.

Emily P. Freeman:

... but here we are. Here we are.

Kate Bowler:

But such winners, Emily, everyone went on to live their best lives now in early martyrdom so blessed life now.

Emily P. Freeman:

Blessed life now. Well, Kate, I am so grateful to have you today. Thank you for sharing about your right now life and this messy middle that we all find ourselves in together.

Kate Bowler:

You are such a gem. Thanks for doing this.

Thanks for listening to episode 194. I hope this simple practice of being human can be just one more

The Next Right Thing with Emily P. Freeman

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, but the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are making our lives. As always you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com. And you can find at katebowler.com and on Instagram @KatecBowler. In addition to being a New York Times bestselling author of several wonderful books, including *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

Kate also hosts a podcast called *Everything Happens* and she's a professor at Duke University. She's been featured on NPR, *The Today Show*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Ted* stage and now finally *The Next Right Thing* podcast. In closing some final words from Kate's newest book, *No Cure for Being Human*, "Years, dwindle into months, months into days and you must begin to count them. All my dreams and ambitions, friendships, and petty fights, vacations and bedtimes with a boy and dinosaur pajamas must be squeezed into hours, minutes, seconds. How should I spend them"? Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.