



195: Be Your Own Friend

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 195. This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's 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.

It's a Friday in September and I find myself in a room with Singing Quakers and stained glass and the piano Rich Mullins played at his baccalaureate. I'll back up. I didn't find myself here. I came here on purpose on an airplane. It's the apprentice gathering at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. The school where I serve as one of the residency lecturers for the master's program in Christian spiritual formation and leadership. Friends University is also the school where the late singer, songwriter, and ragamuffin Rich Mullins attended and graduated from with a degree in music education in 1995, just two short years before he died. The stage where he once sang is right in front of me now.

I don't live in Wichita although I'm starting to feel as though I kind of do as I travel here a lot. But two years ago, I agreed to speak at this gathering and then COVID happened and the gathering was postponed. And so that's where I am now on this Friday afternoon in September, standing beneath a stained glass window listening to the Friends University student choir sing their acapella hallelujahs. In these few moments of stillness, the harmonies echoing off the 100 year old walls, I let my mind wander to consider how full the days have been lately, especially compared to the last 12 months. I consider how I am a contradiction, a woman who both loves and values margin and has a hard time creating it. I remember a story someone told once about Henri Nouwen, how he used to sit in church and couldn't keep still, always bouncing his knee and fidgeting. This brings me an odd sort of comfort. If Henri Nouwen, prolific writer, professor, Catholic priest and contemplative pastor, couldn't sit still during church, then maybe we're all going to be all right.

The Singing Quakers continue and so do my thoughts. Years ago, I took the StrengthsFinder assessment. The one that takes 35 strengths and puts them in order one through 35 based on your answers, revealing to you what your top strengths are. Isn't it interesting how we seek to categorize and quantify certain things about us? How we want some objective source to tell us what we're good at? Maybe to spin our obsessions into positives? I remember my number one strength. According to this assessment is achiever. The description from the website, you work hard and possess a great deal of stamina. You take immense

satisfaction and being busy and productive. And another, you have an internal fire inside of you. It pushes you to do more. Your relentless need for achievement might not be logical, it might not even be focused, but it will always be with you.

I think they mean this to be a compliment, but it feels like a verdict. This does not feel like a strength to me. As I share this with you, you might be surprised to learn this about me. If we've only met through this podcast also, hi, hello. So glad you're here. How can someone who has made it her job to create space for the soul have such difficulty slowing down? How can someone with such a calming voice be so driven? As it turns out, it is both good news and bad news as most things are.

The Quakers reached the end of their song the sopranos bringing us just to the edge of glory before their final hallelujah and we all settle in for the conference in the afternoon. As for me, I'm still considering the question do I really know how to slow down to live without feeling like I have to be productive or is the achiever in me so "strong" that I will make even resting a project to conquer? Fun fact, my number two strength is strategic, which means when faced with any given scenario, I can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues. Now this is a strength, but it also means I'm always looking for relevant patterns and issues. And with an achiever's posture, I work hard at it and I have an internal drive to keep going.

All this comes in handy when faced with a problem to solve, maybe at work or even at home, but it's not so handy in most of the most important moments of life. This is what I know. Being an achiever is a strength. It is also sometimes a weakness. So what do we do when we wish we were different? When a thing we're good at that is sometimes good is also a thing that is sometimes trouble? For me, I've found great comfort in practicing being my own friend. How do I treat a friend who feels the way I feel? I listen, acknowledge, and affirm. I don't let her paint herself in broad strokes. I remind her of her beauty, her strength, and the nuance of being a person. I make her laugh. I don't belittle or make fun, but I support and encourage and wait.

Maybe your next right thing is to be your own friend today, to see your strengths as strengths and as sometimes weaknesses, to bear witness to your own capacity and your lack thereof, to own when you are at your best and when your best gets the best of you. We are all still becoming. We're all being formed even though we are grown. And so there I was at Friends University remembering the gift of true friendship. And maybe it starts with me. And so here we all are being us, loved by Father, Son and Holy Spirit, invited to the table even with our relentless drive, our unfinished projects, our ever-present desire to see the big picture and not being able to. Here we are welcomed even when we haven't made a lick of progress. We're always growing, losing things, wishing something was different and being loved. Thanks be to God who will always be with us. May we be there for each other. May we be there for ourselves as we do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 195 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of being your own friend 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 bigger truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram, @emilypfreeman, or online at emilypfreeman.com.

In closing, here are a few words from Henri Nouwen in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. God has never pulled back his arms, never withheld his blessing, never stopped considering his son the Beloved One. But the Father couldn't compel his son to stay home. He couldn't force his love on the Beloved. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both his son and himself. It was love itself that prevented him from keeping his son home at all costs. It was love itself that allowed him to let his son find his own life even with the risk of losing it.

Here the mystery of my life is unveiled. I am loved so much that I am left free to leave home. The blessing is there from the beginning. I have left it and keep on leaving it, but the Father is always looking for me with outstretched arms to receive me back and whisper again in my ear, "You are my Beloved. On you my favor rests."

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