



196: Make a Life Energy List

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 196.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making 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. Today we're going to talk about a commonly made list that comes up when we talk about decision-making, either decisions that we need to make for ourselves, or we often recommend this list to others. You know it well, I'm sure. It's the pros and cons list. Listen in.

This is the time of year where I'm nostalgic for shows that seem to either be set in the fall or that I tend to watch in the fall. And one of those shows is Gilmore girls. Well, there's an episode where Rory has to decide which college that she wants to go to. And this is the episode I always think of when I'm thinking about a pro-con or a pros and cons list. In the episode, which is by the way for the fans, that's season three, episode 17, A Tale of Poes and Fire, but Rory makes a three pro-con list. One for Harvard, one for Princeton, and one for Yale. Tough life, right? By making the list, she's such a rule follower that she vows to obey the list, no matter what it says in the end. Well, at the end of the episode, she finally makes her decision. I won't give spoilers, even though it's been over to 10 years since the episode aired, but at the end of the episode, the camera zooms in to one of her lists and shows the winning school to have more pros than cons.

If you've been around here for any amount of time, you might already know I'm not a big fan of the pro-con list. I think they're kind of dumb. And maybe you think that too, but I admit that there are times when I am in a position to have to make a decision, especially one that I feel really stuck in. Sometimes I pull out that sheet of paper and I write pro on one side, con on the other. I put a line down the middle and I start making my list. There are really good reasons why we love to make a pros and con list.

First, they seem objective. Here are the facts. These are the positive things about this decision, and these are possibly the negative things. And so it seems like we are doing an exercise in a factual research, even if it's just coming from our own brains in that moment.

Secondly, they seem productive. At least I'm doing so. There is also something about writing things down that can be informative that can help us clarify our thoughts.

And number three, another reason why we like this kind of list is, and this is partly true. It can help us discern what the real decision is. I can't tell you how many times I have been stuck feeling like I'm indecisive about something. And I know in general what the decision is, but I often say, if you can't put the decision in a complete sentence or a clear sentence, then you're not going to be able to make a clear decision.

I think one thing that a pros and cons list can help us do is put our decision into a clear sentence, because that's the only way we're going to be able to think through what are the good things or the bad things, or the positives or the negatives, or the pluses or the minuses about this decision. But I just don't think these lists really work, not when it comes to any significant or valuable decision that we make in our lives, or at least they don't work all by themselves. And you already know this. But one of the reasons why is because this is a purely analytical exercise and it's pretty preliminary, it's kind of the basics. It can overlook nuance, layers, or other centers of intelligence, like your own deep knowing about something. And sometimes that's hard to put into words and it's certainly hard to put down on a list.

Another reason why I just don't think they work very well is the pro-con list inherently has one major flaw, in that it assumes every line item on the list weighs an equal amount. And we all know that's not true. A list could have 10 cons on it and only one pro, but if that pro is your family or your health or your safety, well, then that one item on the pro list is going to outweigh everything else on the con list.

A third reason why I just don't think they work well is we tend to make these when we're feeling desperate, when we're on a timeline or a deadline. And just by nature of what it is, it's more of a preliminary exercise, which means it's something we do maybe when we're just starting to think about a decision. Yet it's also something we do when we have a headline or we have to make a decision quickly, or we are stuck in a decision. So those two things tend to compete. I don't make great decisions when I'm feeling desperate and a rushed pro-con list is not typically one that's helpful for me.

Then finally, another reason why they don't really work, which is thing we've mentioned already, is that there really isn't a lot of room for nuance. There's not a lot of room to tell the whole story or to get a lot of feedback or to hear yourself say words. And so when it comes to making lists or writing things down, I am a huge fan, but I just submit that perhaps the pros and cons list isn't the most helpful list when it comes to making a decision. Instead, I'd like to make what I refer to as a life energy list. And this is a list that I've talked about before. It's reminiscent of the Daily Examen, which is a spiritual practice that we often can engage in maybe at the end of a day or at the end of a week, looking back and thinking about where do we see God. Reminiscent of that. A life energy list, it sort of takes in your whole life and your whole experience rather than just engaging your mind.

There are many ways you could make a list like this. And I have a few questions that I recommend you ask yourself when it comes to making a life energy list. Again, this could be a list that you make as you go along in life. You could this list weekly, monthly, quarterly, or you could just make it when you have decisions to make. But I would recommend that it be a practice that you engage in as you go along the way on a more regular basis, because it can help us pay attention, or at least it helps me pay attention to my own life as I'm living it. But when it comes to making this list for the purpose of making a decision, I have five questions I like to ask.

Question one, what is life-draining? When it comes to this decision and you think about your energy in

your body, in your day-to-day goes on, what in your mind is life-draining about one outcome or another of the decision? Let's say whether you say yes or no to something, or whether you choose this path or that path, what are the things that would be life-draining when it comes to that?

Second question, what is life-giving? When you consider a certain path or it's alternative, what are things that come to mind that would be life-giving about that path? And sometimes for some of us, this is a really difficult question to answer because we are not used to or accustomed to asking ourselves that question. What would really bring life in whichever scenario we choose?

Third question, what stirs up fear? Is there one particular decision that feels scarier than the other? Is there one path that feels more risky than the other? Now, that's not to say that the scariest path might not be your next right thing, but it's important to name what are the fears that are stirred up in you when you consider making this decision?

And the fourth question to consider, and it's kind of a second part to what stirs up fear, is asking yourself about that fear. Is this a dread fear, something you dread and are really terrified of, or is it an excited fear, something that you look forward to, but it's scary because it's unknown? It might be a mix of both and one or the other is not right or wrong. It's just simply paying attention. It's letting your life give you information that you can hold in front of you and name and consider, when you think about making a particular decision, here are the fears that rise to the surface.

I think it's probably true, any decision that's important to us, there's always going to be an aspect of fear there. I don't think we can avoid it. And just because you're afraid doesn't mean that's the right or wrong decision. I think that's something that I am learning more and more about and more and more about in my own life. Is this idea of making the right decision or the wrong decision. So often I think we say that the decision was right if the outcome was successful, and the decision was wrong if the outcome wasn't successful. But let me tell you, there are a lot of assumptions in those statements, namely, what we define as success and failure.

I think Dallas Willard had it right when he said the most important thing about us is not the decisions that we make, but the person we're becoming. That's a paraphrase, but I think the essence is there. Our lives are filled with choices and we make many of them without thinking a whole lot about them. But when it comes to choosing between two equally good things or worse two or four or eight equally awful things, how do we know when to say yes and when to say no, when to say this way or that way. And how can we reflect on our past decisions in order to inform future ones?

I really think paying attention to the energy in our life, to what brings life, what drains life, what brings joy, what steals joy, what stirs up fear and what kind of fear that is, these things can be really helpful. Maybe not all by themselves, but they can be helpful in determining both what is true and what we wish were true.

And that brings us to the final question, what do you want to do? This is a scary question for a lot of us, because we aren't used to being able to answer this question honestly. Some of us feel like what we really want to do is selfish and even just admitting or confessing what we deeply want to do is not allowed or it's too self-focused. But just to make the distinction for us here, what you want is what you want, whether or not you admit it. But if we fail to admit the thing that we most deeply long for, something that we

really, really want, that desire still exists, but now it's being hushed. And what happens when our desire is hushed, is that it will still come out one way or another, but unfortunately it may come out sideways in the form of frustration, anxiety, health problems, lack of sleep, perseverating on certain thoughts, anxious or obsessive thoughts, frustration with family members or anger at ourselves.

It's important for me to remember there is a difference between confessing and naming what I most deeply want and demanding what I most deeply want. There's a difference there. I don't think we're used to separating them out. I think we have...

At least I'll speak for myself. I have grown up thinking, and I don't know where this came from fully, but I have grown up thinking that saying what I want is equal to demanding it and is not true. But what that's caused me to do is to not say what I want at all. And in fact, it's caused me to have difficulty even being able to discern or name what it is that I want because I'm so out of practice. I think a life energy list can be helpful in continuing to bring to mind what it is we most deeply want. It doesn't mean we'll get it or that things will turn out that way, but at a lovely practice of being human, of being fully ourselves and alive in this moment, to be able to say what it is that we want, even if we might not get it. And I know that can be scary, but I think it's an important practice, especially when it comes to decision-making.

One of the things about a pro-con list that I think is flat is often we make them all by ourselves. I have been known to wake up in the middle of the night and make a pro-con list right there 2:00 in the morning, because I've got so much in my mind and I just need to get it out on paper. But I think the beauty of making a life energy list instead is first, it can happen way before a decision needs to be made. We can do this as a practice in our life, as one of our rhythms of life, and weave it in so that we're more often aware of what brings life, what drains life and what do I most deeply want.

But another thing that I think can be most helpful when it comes to a life energy list is to not try to make it alone. I'll admit this was counterintuitive at first, when I first started meeting with her, mainly because so much of my faith up until that point had been pretty individual about me and my relationship with God, my own faith, my own belief, and this idea of allowing someone else to speak into my life or to hold space for me as God moved and loved and was present with me, that was a foreign concept, but it's become one that is not only familiar. It's also become one that's been really sacred for me.

And so this idea of a life energy list is a beautiful practice, but I think it's made even more beautiful if we can practice it in the presence of a co-listener. I mentioned a spiritual director. I also think doing this with a good friend is equally as helpful. Could be even a spouse or a partner or a pastor or a spiritual friend, even a counselor. These questions are good ones to pay attention to, to be able to say with our out loud voice, in the presence of someone else, what's life-draining? What's life-giving? What stirs up fear? And is it dreaded fear or excited fear? What do you want to do deeply in your heart of hearts?

Well, I'll never say not to make a pros and cons list. I think it could be a nice first practice when it comes to making a decision, but a richer and more informative practice for me has been making a life energy list in the presence of a co-listener. And perhaps as you approach your own decision-making, whether those are large decisions or small decisions of everyday life, maybe this practice could be helpful for you as well as you discern your next right thing.

Thanks for listening to episode 196 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of making a life energy list 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 that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman, and online at emilypfreeman.com, where we provide transcripts for this and every episode of The Next Right Thing Podcast.

In closing, one of my favorite quotes from Parker J. Palmer in his book *Let Your Life Speak*: “Is the life you’re living the same life that wants to live in you? Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.” Thanks for listening and I’ll see you next time.