



## 206: What Worked in 2021

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 206. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you're just needing 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. At the end of every year I write down a list of what worked and what didn't. This was originally inspired by my friend and probably yours too, Anne Bogel. She often shares her own list to over on her website at [modernmrsdarcy.com](http://modernmrsdarcy.com). Here today I want to share a list of what's worked for me this year, as well as a few tips and resources for you if you want to make your own. Listen in.

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Now, I'll say this right at the top: You might be someone who is a little bit shy or afraid of or wanting to avoid reflection altogether because you either don't know where to start, or maybe it tends to take you down a dark road of shame, overwhelm, or regret. Maybe to you this feels like a practice of looking back at things we can't change or do differently. And what's the point anyway? Well I have a lot of points, but if you've been around a while you probably already know them. I will say if that's you, here are a few things to keep in mind: Number one, one option is for you, for now, just focus on what did work this year. That's what I'll be doing in this episode, so you can model your own reflection on this framework if that's helpful. Number two: If you do choose to consider both what did work and what did not work, be sure to sit next to yourself as you would a dear friend, or maybe even a small child.

There's no scolding allowed. No relentless critics are invited to this exercise. And then finally number three: For me, it helps to ask God to show me what I need to know today. Nothing more and nothing less. And then be gentle with whatever emerges. I've thought about this a lot, and I'm not sure if true transformation is possible without some sort of reflection. And while I do believe that is true, I also believe you don't have to do it all at once. Your pace is your pace. Now for my pace. I've been keeping a list of what works and what doesn't all year long. Most specifically, during December I've been reflecting on that list and lists I've taken throughout the year a little bit every day this month. Now, this might sound like a lot to you but you have to understand this is the result of a foundational practice that I've honored and I've been cultivating for years and years.

It grows from my deeply rooted belief that you don't have to wait until the end of the year to reflect on your life. Two resources I hope will help you with this. If you would like to begin to develop a practice of reflection in your own life and you maybe haven't yet, or you have a little bit but you want some more

help, two things quickly. Number one, the Next Right Thing guided journal. You can start at the beginning of any month and use it for 12 months. It's a journal that I created that I use personally. I've used it now for a full year. I'm starting my new one. I just started my new one this month. Of course, since it's the end of the year it makes sense to start in January if you want to do that. If you're listening to that later, like I said, you can start at the beginning of any month.

I have a complete and epic episode that walks you through how to use the journal. Every section, every page. So once you get your copy, go ahead and listen to episode 189. It's called How To Use the Next Right Thing Guided Journal, and that will help you out a lot. The second resource I want to tell you about, and I mentioned it in an episode earlier this month, I have a list of 10 questions to ask yourself at the end of the year, or really at the end of anything. It's a simple one page download. You can get it in the show notes, and we'll email it to you for free so don't forget that. For the purposes of this episode I'm going to share what worked for me in 2021. I'm still working on and, honestly, reckoning with what did not work for me in 2021. If you want to read that list, I'll share it in my monthly letter that goes out at the end of the year. You can sign up to get that at [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter).

And just so you know, for over 15 years I've been doing work on the internet, y'all. And the majority of that time I've been writing under the umbrella phrase, "Creating space for your soul to breathe." Now, five years or so ago, maybe a little bit over that I added, "So you can discern your next right thing in love." That's not just a thing I say. I actually believe it's possible, and I make content and creative decisions to make it so. That means I truly believe in the value of creating space for your soul to breathe. And sometimes that starts with your inbox. So if you hear from me, that's what I hope you'll experience when you get an email from me in your inbox. Okay, now onto the list. What worked for me in 2021? I'll share in categories and I'll work to be transparent as is necessary.

First category, let's just start with professional. Number one: We had a new book release. Now, it was a journal. It still counts as a book. It sold better than anyone expected, even though there was a great printing debacle of 2021. Hey, remember how over 2000 journals were printed in light gray ink with paper so thin the book was falling apart? Remember how people started leaving terrible reviews because of it, and there wasn't anything I can do but apologize? Remember how all that happened on the morning of January 6th, 2021? Do you remember what else happened on that day? We're not going to talk about that right now, but... And actually I'm not off to a very good start because I'm supposed to be sharing what worked this year. But I guess what worked from that, even though all of that did happen, it's true, but here's the deal: We got through it and you still showed up.

You still bought that journal and you graciously received that apology. My publisher sent out new copies to replace the ones that were falling apart and were too light to read, and we carried on together. So starting off, here's to say you worked in 2021. So here's to you. A second thing professionally that worked: I hired my replacement in Hope Writers. In June I announced we were looking for a new director of content at Hope Writers to take my place. That was in June. We finally found someone in August, and now at the end of December she is fully onboarded and doing incredible work for us. But I just want to point out, yes, that is something that worked this year. But it took me years to get to a place to be able to hand it off. And then it took six full months to find, hire and onboard the right person into the seat.

Now, I'm going to mention this in a couple minutes but one of the things that helped us so much was following Gino Wickman's Entrepreneurial Operating System, or affectionately abbreviated to EOS. And

having a system like that to follow really helped us know and clarify, what is my role and what are we looking for in a replacement? And then what does it look like to integrate that person into our business in a way that's going to be sustainable and helpful for everyone involved? So that's something that worked for us in 2021. While I'm no longer the director of content for Hope Writers, I am still one of the co-owners and co-visionaries of the company. So that kind of takes me out of the day to day work of Hope Writers, but I am still involved. Just wanted to make that clear. Another thing that worked for me professionally was making professional connections.

If you've been around a while or if you've been subscribed to my newsletter, you might already know or remember in 2019 and 2020 I experienced some really lonely years professionally. I know a lot of you did too. And it wasn't just pandemically-related. I talked about some here on the podcast, and it was that I didn't really have a group of colleagues that I could connect with or ask questions of or meet regularly to talk about wins, struggles, or big dreams. Now, that's not to say I didn't know people or didn't have friends in this business who I could go to. I totally did, and I'm so grateful for that. But I didn't have anything regular and I didn't have anyone that I felt like I could fully count on on a monthly basis where anyone was keeping tabs or I was doing that for someone else.

But this year finally I do have that. I've been meeting twice a month with three other authors. We've been doing that over Zoom to talk about our goals and our struggles. And we're planning to get together in person in 2022. I've also been meeting with another group of five women on a monthly basis where we talk a little bit more intentionally about both publishing and also diversity and equity. And then finally, my sister and I have been intentionally meeting to talk about our goals for the year, both personal and professional, in what we have affectionately named Sister Mind. Of course we did. These three groups have saved my life this year. Another thing that worked professionally in 2021 was taking some time off in July. Now, I didn't take the whole month off. I can't do that. I haven't been able to do that in a while, but I have loved taking a few weeks off in July.

I tried it again this year and it worked great. And then finally I wanted to share some professional tools I've used this year that have worked well for me. One of those is Michael Hyatt's Full Focus Planner. I've been using it for a couple of years now, and I can share a link in the show notes if you're interested. It is an affiliate link, just so you know, which just means you pay the amount you would always pay, I just get a little kickback. But that planner works really good for me and for the way that I design days. I'll say one of the things I love about it is that it has a full two-page spread for every day. It is a quarterly planner, so yes, I get four of them every year. Don't at me. It's just it works for me. You don't have to use it.

But I do like that two page spread because I find I take a lot of notes every day. I've been in a lot of meetings this year, and so I find that every day I need the space to write both what's happening, what my goals for that day are, and any notes or to-dos that I want to record. Another tool I've used, I mentioned it already, Gino Wickman's book Traction and his entire Entrepreneurial Operating System. It's what we run Hope Writers on, and I've implemented some of that framework and some of those principles into my own Emily P. Freeman work. At Hope Writers we're about a little over two years into implementing EOS and it has saved our business life. And then finally, another professional tool I've used that's worked is Lara Casey's Power Sheets. I get one of these towards the end of every year and then prep for the year to come.

And this will be my third year using the Power Sheets, and I love them. And this is something that my sister and I go through together during our Sister Mind time. So I highly recommend Lara Casey and her

wonderful goal planning brilliance. So those are some that have worked for me in my work this year. Here are a few things that have worked in my home and in our family: Number one, home projects. Listen, I have finally said yes to some things I've been putting off. We made some decisions in our kitchen and for our patio. These decisions are ones that used to scare me. Listen, our first year of marriage I cried heavy sobbing tears when I had to re-nail a hole in the wall because the first one I nailed was in the wrong place. It also took me months to choose a paint color for our living room walls that first year of our marriage.

I was ridiculous, is what I'm saying. But 2021 was a year that we made some big decisions at home for our kitchen and a bonus room renovation. And it's made a lot of difference for us in our family. I'm so glad we were able to do this before the girls graduated from high school. Also, PS, we added gas logs to our fireplace. Something. I never thought my mountain, North Carolina-loving husband would allow us to do. But it was his idea and everything is better because of these gas fireplace logs. Thank you, and amen. Another thing that worked this year was we took a family trip with my sister and her family. We went out west to Montana. And we've never traveled with just the 10 of us before. And that sounds like a lot when I say it, the 10 of us. But her kids are all grown and mine are basically grown. And we weren't sure how it would work, but it was simple and fun. And we hope to do it again.

Speaking of our grown children, this year we went on several college tours. I don't know why I was so nervous about this before but I think it had to do with the fact that this is our very first rodeo when it comes to sending kids away to college, and we're going to be doing it times two. That's twice the humans who will be impacted if we mess this up. That's basically what it felt like. But we worked some college tours into our travels this year, during spring break and summer break and a few weekend days here and there. And it turned out to be something kind of fun and even a little bit exciting, thinking about the future. What a privilege it is to be able to send our girls to college. What a grief it's going to be to let them go.

Another thing that worked in our home, in our family this year was taking walks with John and sometimes even with the kids. To preface this, I'll just say I know I haven't talked much here or anywhere really about the fact that we left our church about a year ago and we haven't found a new one yet. I've written a couple of posts on Instagram about it so far, and that is about the extent of my public words. I do want to say this is deeply personal. And on the one hand I know thousands of you are in the same boat. And so that's what makes me want to talk about it and share about our own experience and our own journey. But on the other hand, there are also a lot of highly critical people who I don't think are safe humans for me to share my own spiritual journey with in this way.

I wish I could just tell all the critics to hold their ears while I say certain things, but that's just not the way it works. But what worked is, even though our worship looks different right now, one thing that has worked is taking walks both with John after dinner and with the kids and John sometimes on the weekends through the forest of our neighborhood, beside the lake, and along the trails. Thanks be to God who shows up everywhere if we have the eyes to see.

The next category of things that have worked that I wanted to share with you is in my creativity. My most downloaded episode this year was episode 185. It's called Why Makers Struggle to Get Things Done. It was inspired by an essay written years ago by Paul Graham who writes that there are basically two types of schedules, a maker's schedule and a manager's schedule. This year what worked was beginning to turn back to my maker roots. I've been operating on a manager's schedule for several years, and this last quarter I can feel myself turning back to the maker in me. I can feel myself honoring what I need to create

and to make. I'm not fully there yet, but it is slowly happening and I can feel the change even in my body. And that change is good. And that's something that's working in 2021.

Another thing is I've written some words that I'm most proud of this year. Though admittedly they aren't the most downloaded, read, or shared, but words like, "For beauty to come from ashes, something has to burn." And, "A prayer, show us what needs to die and give us the courage to wear black to the funeral." These are from episode 163: Reflection as Activism. I'll tell you I've also written a lot of words I haven't shared anywhere, and I'm proud of those too. Creativity flourishes even when no one knows about it. And finally, something that worked this year was trusting my own creative intuition. I'm a grown adult but I'm here to tell you sometimes I'm really still learning how to trust my own intuition, my own deep knowing. My own voice as I lean close to pay attention to the voice of the spirit of God. But I'm learning, and I've been exercising what I've been learning several times.

And as I do, it's been affirmed again and again. And I'm grateful for that. Final category: I'll share what worked in 2021 spiritually and personally. One is teaching at Friends University. Now, this is a professional one actually, but I have to tell you it's also spiritually generative for me. Collaborating with my colleagues there, connecting with students in person, prepping and tweaking my lectures, and taking up space in an academic setting have all served a huge role in my own personal spiritual formation this year. Secondly, I've been meeting with my spiritual director more often. During 2020 last year we only met twice, but this year we're back on track almost monthly in person. And it makes all the difference. If you want to learn more about spiritual direction, what it is, how to find one, I have two episodes. One is Spiritual Direction for Beginners. That's episode 167. And then How to Find a Spiritual Director. That's episode 178.

Another thing that worked this year I'm proud to say is my morning routine. Again, last year that was something that did not work. I kind of got out of my rhythm in my morning routine. It was hard to find a new one. But this year the routine of reading, writing, and prayer in the morning is one that's started working for me again. And one thing I found that was helpful for me, something I had to change up was where I sit in the house based on that season. I know it sounds weird but this was helpful for me to learn because when the season changed it was like my morning routine got out of whack. And as I paid attention to the at I realized that it has to do with where I'm sitting in my house. For example, in the summertime when the sun is up and I get up in the morning, I can sit in my sunroom because it's bright in there and it feels lively. And I like to be in there.

But in the fall and wintertime, when I wake up in the dark I can't sit in my sunroom and read. It's not happy and comfortable. So instead I sit by a lamp in my living room. And it feels more seasonally appropriate, and it's really helped make a difference this year. Finally, something that worked in 2021 was I went on a personal retreat. Now, this is actually also a preview of something that didn't work. And I'll explain. I wanted this to be the year that I honored my desire to take a retreat every quarter. Now, the truth is I'm here to tell you I only did it one time. I wanted to do it four times this year, I only did it one time. It was in February and it was a disaster. I know I'm exaggerating a little bit.

I'll say more about that in my newsletter because, y'all, we don't have time. But I'm going to put it on my what worked list and what didn't work list, and here's why: Because the fact that it happened at all is a win. Even if it only happened one time, even though it didn't go as planned, it still happened and it still counts. I guess that's the thing. Though it may not seem this way, naming what worked this year isn't just a practice to look back at all the things that went perfectly well. Sometimes what worked well actually

led to a little heartbreak or was the result of naming our grief or came about because something else went terribly wrong. Sometimes what worked is a partial solution found in the dark, but still we look back, we name it, we celebrate it, and then you know what's next. We do our next right thing in love. Amen.

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Thanks for listening to episode 206 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of reflecting on what worked this year can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow, because while this is a podcast about making decisions we know our decisions are actually making our lives. And no better way to realize that than when we look back and name what worked. I'm still on my list, like I said, of what did not work this year. And if you want to receive that, sign up for my monthly letter at [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter). And don't forget, if you want some guidance to reflect on the end of your year I have 10 questions you can ask yourself. Available now at [emilypfreeman.com/10questions](http://emilypfreeman.com/10questions). That's the number ten, 10 questions. Or just click the link in the show notes and you can get it there.

Spoiler alert: the first two questions are, what worked? And what didn't? Mostly, in the words of Beth Silvers, I hope you have the best week available to you. Here's to closing out this year and bringing in the new one. And now a few words from the message version of Psalm 139 verses seven through 12.

Is there any place I can go to avoid Your spirit, to be out of Your sight? If I climb to the sky, You're there. If I go underground, You're there. If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon, You'd find me in a minute. You're already there waiting. Then I said to myself, "Oh, He even sees me in the dark." At night I'm immersed in the light. It's a fact. Darkness isn't dark to You. Night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to You.

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