



208: Hold the Tension Longer

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 208.

This is a podcast about making decisions but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue or 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.

Sometimes I share stories here from my very own life, thoughts from my very own head or prayers from my own heart. Often I lean more on the stories, thoughts and prayers of others, highlighting someone else's insight and wisdom, commenting on it, quoting their words and bringing their wisdom here for us to learn from and to hold together as we continue to daily discern, what's my next right thing? Today I'm sharing words from an author I've quoted here many times but it's from a section of one of his books that I've not brought to the table for us yet. At least not to this extent. It's a concept I'm finding to be both super helpful and maddening from Parker Palmer in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*. This book was one of my top 10 favorite reads from last year, 2021, and I pulled it back out again.

And I want to back up just for a moment and pull the curtain back a little bit to let you know about my own process, which has become second nature for me but could be helpful for you and your process. I'm a writer, as you know. And what that means to me is that it's my job to pay attention both to the world around me but also to the world within me and how they talk to each other. But because that's annoyingly broad, one of the things that I have honed over the last nearly 15 years of calling myself a writer, are the filters through which I'm always seeing the world. Those filters are for me, spiritual formation, creativity and discernment and decision making. These are the things that interest me personally, subjects that I have studied and written books about and want to continue learning about, not just for my own sake but if I could humbly say, also for yours.

Not because I'm some kind of expert or theologian but because I'm simply an artist and I want to co-journey with those of you who are willing to walk along the way together. And so when I'm listening to a podcast or reading a book, watching a movie or even talking with friends, I'm always noticing if there's a principle or a story or a metaphor or an image that will be helpful for me in my own work of discernment. Now, most of the time I don't share any of those things. I don't write about them. I don't post about them. I don't bring them here. I hear things all the time that I don't record or repurpose but I'm always hearing them because I've trained myself this way. By the way, you can train yourself this way too, if you want to

be intentionally learning something specific. And I recommend that you do.

By the way, side note, is this a side note of the side note? I think it is. We will get back on track in a minute but I just want to mention, in the early days of blogging, I remember being out with family or friends who knew that I had a blog. This is we're talking 2008, and something funny or interesting would happen at dinner or whatever and someone would say, "Are you going to write about that on your blog?" And I have to tell you, that always deeply bothered me because A, I didn't just write about something because it was funny or interesting to the group and B, if they read my blog, they would know that. But anyway, so let the record show that I am not out and about mining my life for content, at least not intentionally all the time but I am always paying attention to those things that matter to me, particularly when I read.

If I see a line or a story shared by someone else that speaks to one of those subjects that I mentioned, that have the biggest role in my own transformation, I'm going to mark it. And if I believe that it's going to be something that's helpful for us here, as we talk about our next right thing, as we talk about discernment and decision making, well then I'll add the letters NRT, for next right thing, right there in the margin. And that's just as a reminder to me that, this could be helpful as we do our discernment work together.

And so now we're back to me reading Parker Palmer's beautiful book, *A Hidden Wholeness*. And now this book as a whole, if you don't know, if you haven't read it or haven't heard about it, it's about the journey we're each on of living an integrated life and how that journey is both a solitary one but it's also a communal one. Parker Palmer speaks to the part of us that desperately wants to live an undivided life and what it takes to do this with integrity and with courage.

Now toward the end of the book, there's a chapter called *The Third Way*. And Palmer writes about what he calls the tragic gap and the pain of standing in it. Now, what is the tragic gap? Well, maybe you could guess, but in his words, it's quote, "A gap between the way things are and way we know they might be. It's a gap that never has been and never will be closed." Oof. Well, Parker Palmer is a writer, a speaker and a member of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as our friends, the Quakers, and he's writing here about being open to a third way, whether that be as a nation who hopes to live in a world at peace or as a business partner, wanting to find a good solution to a problem.

Another quote, he writes, "In a contentious business meeting, a better solution may well exist but the pressures of ego time and the bottom line make it unlikely that we will find it. In a world at war, peace may be our dream but the grim realities of greed, fear, hatred and doomsday weaponry quickly turn that dream into a delusion."

Alright, now that feeling that you're experiencing right now, as you hear me quote those two scenarios, that is the tragic gap. That space where we see what is and we see what we hope could be but there doesn't seem to be a possible way to get there, much less an easy one. The tragic gap is where we stand here at a crossroads and the road drops out and we see the hope of the other side but the way across looks grim at best, deadly at worst and we decide it's impossible to move ahead toward that hopeful road so we'll just settle for this side of the gap even though it's painful, even though things remain unresolved. And so I marked this down for us because that moment right there is often where our decision fatigue wins out. Our resolve to hang in there and to look for that third way, that takes courage and patience and belief that let's be honest, we just might not have, especially not now, especially not lately.

Another quote, “As species, we are profoundly impatient with tensions of any sort and we want to resolve every one of them as quickly as we can.” Now I’ll speak for myself, Emily P. Freeman, I don’t like holding that tension. Left to myself, I want to yank the rope on one side or I want to give up my grip on the other just so the thing can be resolved already. Even if the solution is subpar. I don’t like admitting that but that’s something that’s in me. Maybe that’s in you too. Palmer writes that when we avoid holding the tension of conflicting viewpoints because we just want to get on with it, it may seem like the tension is resolved at first but by cutting the exploration short, he writes, “We have deprived ourselves of a chance to find a better way by allowing opposing ideas to enrich and enlarge each other until a new vision emerges and by letting the majority decide which way we should go, we often drive the tension underground, creating an embittered minority who devote themselves to undermining the decision we thought we had made.”

I know I’m sharing a lot of quotes but I think it’s worth it and it’s a conversation worth having. And I guess it poses the question for me, why aren’t we willing to hold the tension longer? And I say this to myself with so much compassion. I think the bottom line is that it hurts too much. We all know the pain of a tug of war, of holding a rope on one side and the rope burn that comes with it on our hands. But imagine standing in the middle of two ropes, one force pulling you in one direction, another equally powerful force pulling you in the opposite direction and there you are in the middle and you’re breaking in two. Or is there a third way?

And I guess that’s the question that Parker Palmer is inviting us to consider and that is, are you breaking apart? Or are you, as he suggests, beginning to break open? Is it possible that by holding the tension longer, we might discover a spaciousness that we have not previously imagined? Is it possible to, as Palmer says, “open into new capacity, a process that is not without pain but one that many of would welcome.” Is it possible?

I’m beginning to see that even though that kind of tension is impossible to hold in everything, I’m sensing that it’s a tension that I’m being invited or perhaps even compelled to hold in some of the most important things. Even though it takes time, even though it’s uncomfortable to hold two sides of the rope, even though it threatens sometimes to tear me in two, it is a grace given unto us by God that we might be broken open and not broken apart. Others have lived in this tragic gap before us. Mother Teresa lived there, so did Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks, so do healthcare workers, teachers and mothers and so can we. May we find the courage to continue to stand in the tragic gaps of our lives, to hold the tension a little longer, to believe that God is with us and to see that hope can make a way through impossibilities. May we be people filled with compassion, a supernatural patience and a willingness to be broken open into a greater capacity for peace and beauty as we continue to do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 208 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of holding the tension longer 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, you know the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a

transcript of this and every episode. I know this episode might bring up more questions than answers. It might bring to the fore, some complications and some weariness that we all might be feeling but I guess what I'm also hoping for is that it begins to stir us up toward hope, to not giving up on ourselves or each other, to not be afraid to pause and wait and fight and pray for a third way to emerge between us.

Well in closing, you know I have an other quote from Parker Palmer and again, this is from A Hidden Wholeness. He writes, "As I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope. Maybe so." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.