



## 222: What's Saving My Life Right Now

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 222. 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 the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Today's question, what's saving your life right now? It's a simple, direct question. It's also deeply thought provoking. I'll share my list with you today. Listen in.

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In her memoir, *Leaving Church*, author Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of being invited to speak at a church. The topic she was invited to speak about was an invitation with a simple question: Tell us what's saving your life right now. Because she's the one who tells the story and writes about it, most people credit Barbara Brown Taylor with the question. But when asked, she credits John Claypool, who was once a Baptist pastor and later became an Episcopal priest from what I can tell from a little internet research.

Regardless of where the question originates from, so many of us have carried this question forward. This is true of the best questions, and asking yourself or someone else, "What's saving your life right now?" could go in a million different ways. It could be answered forever, and you might never get to the bottom of it. Barbara points out wisely that it's easy to list what's killing us, that we could probably make those lists mentally, and we might do it all day long. But what a wonderful way to redeem the day by turning that on its head and asking instead, "What's saving your life right now?" Here's what's saving mine.

First, my morning liturgy. That sounds like a fancy way of saying my morning routine, but I have to tell you I've really adopted this idea of it being a liturgy, a movement, a work of the people for the people. Really in this case, the people are the people who live in my house. I've talked on here before about my own morning routine. You can hear about that in Episode 76, Create a Simple Morning Routine, Episode 90, Start with this Simple Rhythm, and Episode 141, Redo your Morning Routine. So I've talked about it a lot before.

I guess one of the reasons why it's top of the list of what's saving my life right now is because this is my way of deciding once what my mornings are going to look like. Of course, sometimes it doesn't go as planned, but for the most part every morning involves coffee and breakfast, conversation with John, a little prayer, a little writing and some reading. This rhythm that I tend to do in a particular order, there's no wrong way to do it, but I do tend to do those things in a particular order, it becomes a liturgy, a walking through, a practice. It's a way I'm practicing my life that really fits my life right now, and in more ways than one it's saving my life.

Another thing related to that, a second thing that's saving my life right now is actually what I eat for breakfast. Now it's a very small thing, but I've started eating two hard boiled eggs for breakfast every day.

For months, I've been doing this. Maybe it's just because, again, it's kind of part of my morning liturgy of waking up to the day and entering into the day, but having those two eggs. Then while they boil, I do a little Wordle. Of course I do. There's just something really life-affirming about beginning my day in this way. Now, it all goes south when that Wordle takes me 40 minutes to finish. Let's don't talk about that. But for the most part, this little routine that happens every morning is saving my life.

A third thing is more of an evening routine or somewhat of a tiny evening liturgy, and that's taking walks with John. We don't do it every single night, but we do it as often as we can. There's something about that 15 to 20 minutes that we walk in the evenings after dinner where we dream about the future. We debrief from the day. We talk without being overheard. It's just been a lovely way to end the day especially now that the weather is a bit warmer.

I'll tell you, too. This is a side note. This year, one of my goals on my list of things I want to do this year was to be more intentional with having weekly date nights with John. Now, it doesn't always happen, and sometimes they look kind of janky. But I think this evening walk is being born out of that intentionality because the truth is we don't really get to have a date night every single week, more now than we used to like when the kids were really little. But now that they're older, it's easier for us to get out, but even sometimes now we're not able to do that.

But those evening walks really help. It goes a long way to be able to spend some intentional time together, especially for the two of us because we can sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that we're spending more time together than we actually are. That's because we both work from home. We both work for ourselves or self-employed, so we can kind of do what we want when we want. But that can sometimes feel like, because we see each other with our eyes quite often, we can be fooled into thinking we're spending quality time together when we're not necessarily doing that. So those evening walks are kind of a recalibration of conversation, of touching base. Honestly, sometimes we're silent when we walk, and that's really life-giving as well.

Well, number four in the more surfacey department, literally, is there is a product that is saving my life. It is a caffeine eye cream for tired eyes from the INKEY List. You can get it at Sephora. Let me just tell you, I've tried several different things. This one so far for me is the one that works the best. When I travel, I don't sleep super well, or there's always a risk of not sleeping well. But I used this caffeine eye cream in the morning and the night, and it greatly reduced the puffiness. It also says it reduces dark circles, but I haven't seen that yet for my own eyes because I've only been using it for about two weeks, but I did notice a difference with the puffiness. So if you struggle with puffy eyes, try this caffeine eye cream for tired eyes from Sephora from the INKEY List.

A fifth thing that's saving my life, my sister. Having a sister has shaped who I am. Lately, I find myself calling her for the smallest reasons: "Should I work on this project this afternoon, or should I work on that project this afternoon?" I literally called her for that reason yesterday. I also recently said to her, "I'm obsessively checking my email. Make me stop." I know there are people who go through their life without a sister. I just can't imagine mine without her. She's saved my life over and over again.

Speaking of people who are saving my life, another one or another group of people are my writing groups. I have two, and they continue to save my life over and over again. Macrina Wiederkehr wrote a prayer I repeat often. It's one that I've shared here on the podcast. It's simple, and it is simply this: "Oh, God, help us to believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how beautiful it is." Well, it's that last bit that comes unexpected because we always think that knowing the truth about ourselves will result in some kind of ugly revelation, don't we, something that we don't want to look at or even acknowledge. But one of the most transformative practices that has helped me believe the beautiful truth about myself is spending time with women I respect and admire. Their presence in my life continues to save it.

So these two writing groups I have, one is a group of six, the other is a group of four, their commitment to saying “Yes” every day, to showing up, to sharing their lived experience, to writing theology, to crafting their poetry, to leading the leaders, to building bridges, to being a neighbor, to planting the flowers, and to leading large teams, these women help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is, and I hope I do the same for them.

Number seven, another group of people who continue to save my life are the teachers that I’ve looked to over the years. Maybe this is top of mind because I recently returned from a trip to Wichita where I teach twice a year in a master’s degree program for spiritual formation. So it’s caused me to think about the people who have been teachers in my own life, people like Fred Rogers, Parker J. Palmer, Mrs. Smith from my eighth grade English class, Krista Tippett, Howard Thurman, Henri Nouwen, Madeleine L’Engle, the moon in the sky, the tree in the cul-de-sac, Dorothy Gale, and my own dad. These people have shaped who I am either directly or indirectly from a distance or up close. Their lives, their words and their presence or just their being continues to save my life.

Number eight, another thing that’s saving my life right now is spiritual direction. Eight years ago on the first day of Lent, I met with a spiritual director for the very first time. Aside from a long break during the pandemic, we’ve met monthly ever since. She is someone who has heard all my words and remains patient to hold them. She also is relentlessly unimpressed with me, which is perhaps the biggest gift. This practice of spiritual direction has saved my life and keeps on saving it over and over again. By the way, if you want to learn more about what a spiritual director is or how to find one, Episode 167, Spiritual Direction for Beginners, and Episode 178, How to Find a Spiritual Director, could be helpful resources for you.

Another thing that’s saving my life right now, the wind chimes in my backyard. I don’t know why and I can’t explain it, but that hollow ring of a backyard chime brings a delight I won’t insult by trying to describe it. Just know that when I hear them, they bring a simple life-altering joy.

Finally, the 10th thing that’s saving my life right now is silence. In an episode of On Being, Krista Tippett says this about her guest, acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton. He’s a global explorer and collector of natural sound. He’s recorded the soundscapes of prairies, shorelines, mountains, and forests around the world. He says, “Silence is an endangered species we must preserve. A quiet place,” he says, “is the think tank of the soul.” Gordon Hempton says, “Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything.”

Years ago, Andrew Sullivan wrote an article for the New York Times called I Used to be a Human Being. Here’s a quote from that article. “Just as modern street lighting has slowly blotted the stars from the visible skies, so too have cars and planes and factories and flickering digital screens combined to rob us of a silence that was previously regarded as integral to the health of the human imagination.” As for me, silence has always been something I value, but the last few years, well, it’s shaping my theology in profound ways, and it’s slowly, inefficiently saving my life.

There you go, 10 things saving my life right now. I wonder what’s saving yours. I encourage you to name them but not to overthink it. Just pay attention as you go, make note of the gifts, profound and simple. My prayer for all of us is that grace will surprise us kindly along the way as we do our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 222 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of naming what’s saving your life right now can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it’s true, this is a podcast about making decisions, but the deeper truth is that

our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman where I love to hear what's saving your life right now. Tag me and let me know.

In closing, I'll share a few words from Barbara Brown Taylor herself from her book, *Leaving Church*, on one thing that's saving her life. She writes, "Encountering God in other people is saving my life now. I do not look for angels anymore, although I have nothing against them. The clerk at the grocery store is messenger enough for me at least if I give her a fraction of the attention that I lavish on my interior monologue. To emerge from my self-preoccupation long enough to acknowledge her human presence is no mean feat, but when I do, I can almost always discover what she has to teach me, and not only she but every person who crosses my path. While it is generally more pleasant for me to encounter people who support my view of reality, I'm finding that people who see things otherwise tend to do me a lot more good. Like quantum physicists, they remind me that reality is more relational than absolute. Every time I'm pretty sure that I have some absolute truth all worked out, a human being comes along to pose an exception to my rule. Over and over, the human exceptions prove to be more revelatory than the rules."

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