



225: Discerning Your Next Right Thing After High School

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 225. 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 this sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, well you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Today's episode is a response to a listener question who said, "I have a rising high school senior. How do we even begin to think about what's next?" Great question. I'm only a little bit ahead of you on this path as my two high school seniors graduate in just a few weeks, but I can share what I've learned and I hope it'll help. Listen in.

As I record this episode, it's the beginning of May. For parents, teachers, coaches, and students, this is a full time of year. For those who have students graduating from high school, it's full for a lot of reasons, both calendar ones and emotional ones. There are so many endings, so many lasts and so many new beginnings. Now, when I was a high school student many years ago, I was not aware of all of the potential new beginnings that were at my fingertips. I mean, I was vaguely aware of it, but for me, I had the choice to go to college, I had the privilege of being able to choose it, and that's what I did. I picked a school. I majored in piano and in bible, and I did that for two years and then transferred two years later to a different school in a different state and graduated with a degree in educational interpreting for the deaf, which I did that for several years. I've shared my story in many different places. Maybe you've heard that story. Well my husband, John also went to a state school. He got his MDiv directly after college.

To complete the school story, I'll just do this real quickly, five years ago, I went to grad school as an adult to get my masters in spiritual formation. So John and I both have advanced degrees and we are the first generation from both sides of our family who have received advanced degrees. But I say all of that just because I think it's helpful for you to know where I'm coming from. College was the path we were familiar with and that was our normal. I put that in quotes. Well now we have three kids together, John and I do. Two of them, who are twins, are graduating from high school in just a few weeks. They have both decided to go to four year in state colleges. One wants to study psychology, the other one is going to study filmmaking.

So these after high school decisions have been on our mind for quite some time now, but it's not until now that I feel like we've even had the tiniest shred of perspective to share with you about it, about the process. And listen, even using the word shred might be too generous of a description. I mean, we are babies in knowing kind of how to help our grown, growing older kids make life decisions. If you have a student whose next right thing is heading to college, you already know most colleges have a May 1st decision date, which at the time of this recording has just passed. So for those of you who are in my exact same shoes, well, this episode may be too little too late, but I offer it anyway.

For those of you who might be a few years behind us, the episode that I wish I could have listened to this time last year, as we headed into their senior year, I had questions like, what should I be thinking about? What's the timeline for these after high school decisions? Who decides it and how can we know? What questions should I be asking? If college is the plan, when do we start visiting schools? If college isn't the plan, what's the plan, what are the options, and how terrible of a mom am I that I'm leaving most of this up to my kids? I know I'm not alone in these questions. I got an email, like I said before, a few weeks ago from a reader who's a mom, and she said she felt frozen about how to manage helping her daughter pick a college, even though she knew the decision wasn't up to her.

So last week I thought, you know what, let's go to the experts. So I asked on Instagram for parents, guardians, and students where you felt stuck when it came to making after high school decisions. And you could probably guess what most of the responses were. Mainly, I'll summarize for you, everyone feels pressure. And the top responses of where the pressure is coming from is really interesting. I'm going to share those in reverse order. Number five was pressure to know how to best help and let their kids make their own choices and not freak out when the kids choose something different. Number four was parents or guardians, feeling pressure to know how to help their students know and name their own talents, their own giftedness and potential. The third most mentioned response was parents and guardians feeling pressure or students feeling pressure because there's just so many options.

One student even said, "what if I miss my one chance? What if I choose wrong?" Which that one, what if I choose wrong, was the second highest response. Either students or parents worried that they would make the wrong or unwise choice or that they would lead their kids in making the wrong or unwise choice. But the number one pressure that parents and students feel when it comes to making after high school decisions is financial. Mainly as it related to college, college debt, or balancing a student's dream next step with the financial responsibility to pay for it.

That's a lot of pressure y'all but the good news is... There's good news here, right? The good news is that you're not alone in it. We all feel these pressures. I don't have a great 1, 2, 3 answer. Hi, have we met? I don't do that here. But I will now share what's worked for us, what surprised me the most this year, and then some great advice curated from people who have gone before us. And just a quick caveat. I'm not going to get into the details of scholarship applications and FAFSA forms and all of those types of things. That stuff is so specific and I'm no expert in any of that. But I will share with you broadly, some things that have worked for us, mostly in mindset shifts and some practical things, too. And I hope it's helpful.

So number one, one thing that's worked for us over time, even before this past year is normalizing conversations about our kids giftedness early. And I don't mean a, "You can do anything you want," which sounds great, but can actually be kind of misleading. My kids are never going to play in the NBA, for example. But to encourage them early and often, "You can be you." So who are you? And helping them uncover what is their unique giftedness. It might not be one thing, and probably it won't be, I hope not. But having that be a normal part of conversation of helping them understand and know what are the ways in which you are showing up in the world that are unique to you and how can we celebrate that and not compare yourself to other people?

The second thing that's worked for us over time is modeling that career and being a grownup doesn't look just one way. Now that's something that you can start no matter how old they are, but that also means we have to believe that ourselves. I wrote a book all about that, it's called *A Million Little Ways*, which talks about and teaches how there's not just one way to be a resourceful, gifted, beautiful God bearing image of a human in the world. That there are actually a million little ways to show up. And by the way, I wrote that book before the show *A Million Little Things* came out. Thank you and you're welcome. But if you need help uncovering your own unique giftedness, that book, *A Million Little Ways*, could be helpful for you or for older high school kids too.

A third thing that's worked for us is to let them take the lead. Now I'll share how this worked for us with some caveats, but following their interest, being excited about what gets them excited, and not freaking out when it doesn't initially make sense to us, that has really helped us, not just in making these after high school decisions, but in also cultivating our relationship, especially as it's started to change over the senior year, as they've gone from being 17, to being 18, to getting a voting card in the mail, it's a whole thing. But letting them take the lead is a great way to help them practice being grown up before they have to be grown up.

And number four, here's some of the caveats there, giving them some guardrails. Let them take the lead, but not without guardrails. In other words, because we have the resources for college, John and I honestly have encouraged them in that direction to explore what interests them, but we didn't do research for them, make phone calls for them, or get ahead of them in the process. We, as the parents, decided, "We're probably going to stay in state y'all and we want you to look there," but we didn't freak out when, for example, one of our kids found a private school they loved out of state and applied there and got in there. Now, was that an automatic yes? No, it was not. But it also wasn't an automatic no. That's the thing about guardrails. It's another way of saying, "Here's some arrows. We want you to move in this direction. But we're going to hold it with an open hand and we're going to listen as we go along the way. And we're going to do it together."

Some things that surprise me as a mom of seniors, and this part might be like, "Duh, Emily. We knew all of those things." But I'm here to tell you right now, this time last year, these are things I didn't know, and they're things that surprise me along the way. Number one, I was surprised about the Common App. Now, if you don't know what that is, according to their website, Common App is a nonprofit membership organization. It represents more than 900 diverse institutions of higher education. They connect applicants and those who support them to a wide array of public and private colleges and universities across all 50 states and in 20 countries. So why am I telling you about the Common App? Well, it makes it possible for your students, for example, to write one essay and submit it to multiple colleges.

Raise your hand if you typed up answers to essay questions to all these different schools and then sent them in the actual mail when you applied to college. I'm raising my hand right now. But that's not how they do it now. So the Common App, though I'd kind of heard tale of it, I didn't really know how it worked or what it was, but I was surprised to see how efficient that was. Now, not every single school is part of the common app and some of the schools that our kids applied to were not. But for the most part, you can find most colleges, if college is your next right thing, in the Common App, and that was surprising to me.

I was also surprised that the first semester of their senior year, those who wanted college to be their next right thing, that was kind of a part-time job. I knew it was going to be a big deal, writing essays and all of that, but it was like a big... It took up a lot of time and it really was kind of like a little part-time job, the essay writing, that up until November of their senior year. And that kind of surprised me, even though I don't feel like it should, because I was told that ahead of time, but there you go.

I was also surprised to learn what good writers my kids are. That's just a personal kudos to my kids. I was surprised to see how organized they were, the things that they've learned. Let your kids surprise you. It might not be those things, but there's probably something, or a lot of things, that you don't know about them yet, and giving them the opportunity to surprise you is fun, and it's a great age to start letting them do that. I was surprised that their English class made the essay writing part of their curriculum. So it was assignments in class for them to write essays and their English teacher looked over them.

Now that was our experience, that might not happen at every school, but I was surprised that they got that

kind of help at school, and I was really glad to see it because the fifth thing that surprised me was I was worried about, and tried to do my research, but wasn't sure if I was doing it right, do they need some type of outside help, like a college coach or a college career writing coach or something like that? We've heard of those things, right? And I had not lined that up. I didn't really know much about it. So the fact that their English teacher helped them in school and it was part of the school day, that was a relief to me. And I was also glad to see that for kids who wouldn't have access to hire outside help. We ended up getting... I think we hired for a couple of hours a coach to have them look over the girls' college essays, and they were helpful, but in the end I realized we didn't need that the way I thought we would.

Like I said, I had some anxiety that I was too late, but I was really glad to know that was an option, but that wasn't something we ended up really taking advantage of, and in our experience I'm glad that we had it, and I'm glad that we didn't really need it. Those are some things that helped and surprise me in our particular and very specific situation, but here's some more general advice for those of you walking with students into their next right thing, whatever that might be. And number one, it's that there isn't one right way. This was repeated so many times in the advice box I put up on Instagram. Even the phrase "do the next right thing" can be misleading and pressure filled because it could be tempting to think, "I have to figure out what my one next right thing is."

But the real question is what's your next right thing? Or even what's your next thing, if it helps to just take the word right. This will be different for you than for someone else, and it's helpful to remember. And in keeping with that, a second thing that I think is important to keep in mind is that we're talking about the next right thing for now, not the next right thing forever. I know the pushback might be that, "But this decision feels huge because I'm determining my life direction forever." Well, here's a deal. Maybe you are, and maybe you're not. That is actually true of every decision we ever make. Forward movement, though, is important, because it gets us going and you make progress by doing, not just by thinking about doing. So it's okay to just choose something and do it for now and know that it doesn't have to be forever.

And the third thing I'll say is if your student knows what they want to do quickly... A lot of this conversation that I'm having here today is implying that maybe your student is stuck or you're stuck, or you don't know what to do, or it feels overwhelming, but there's a chance that your student or you, if you are a student, knew really quickly and known for a very long time what you want to do. That doesn't have to mean that you're missing something. Some kids just know what they want to do. They know they want to go to a particular school, and they don't want to visit other ones. Or they know they want to do a particular job that requires a trade school. Or they're confident in a gap year. Or they know an internship will set them up on the path that they're interested in.

Now you know your kid, but consider following their lead. Everything in us wants to make sure that they're weighing all the options and then making their choices, but consider that maybe they have weighed all the options. It's just their weighing of the options looks really different than the way you would do it. And that's okay. Well number four, when I asked on Instagram, what your best advice was for students moving into their next right thing after high school, this is the one that was repeated so many times I stopped keeping track. So many times people said it is okay to change your mind. Your decision can change. Your major, your college, your roommate, your path, your gap year. It doesn't mean if you change your mind that you chose wrong in the first place. It just means you are a human person. Welcome to the grownup table.

Now as parents hearing that, that might be the advice that was the most helpful to us when we were students, but it can also feel really scary to give to our students or to our high school seniors, especially if you, as the parent or guardian, have your heart set on a particular internship that they were accepted into, or your alma mater that they applied to, or the trade path that they chose that you know is going to be lucrative for them, or the major that they have declared. So guiding with an open hand and believing that

it's true, that it's okay to change your mind. So when your kid comes to you and says where they want to study or where they want to go to school and you get really excited, remember, hold it with an open hand, they might change their mind.

And in fact, we want to help them become grownups who change their mind with confidence and who do it well, because if you look around right now at the landscape of the world, a lot of trouble that we get ourselves into is because we're afraid to change our minds when we receive new and better information. So let's model this well now for our high school juniors and seniors, as they make their decisions moving forward that, "Hey, pick a path. But if you discover new and better information about something out there or about something within you, it's okay to change your mind."

Well, continuing with the advice that I received from you all in helping students make decisions after high school, I wanted to read a little bit more lightning fast here from some readers. So reader, Jenny said, "If you are trying to discern what it is that you're good at, a helpful question to ask yourself is what do you not want to do?" And I thought that was such a great point because it's sometimes hard to say, "What do I want to do? What do I want to do next? What do I think I'm good at?" But to know for sure what you don't want to do and what you're not good at, that's good to name too.

Reader Melody pointed out wisely that the path isn't linear. No one's is. And I'll add to Melody's words there. We think sometimes that the path should be linear, mainly because we experience other people's paths through their own reporting or storytelling, and reporting and storytelling by nature can and often is and should be linear, but real life isn't that way. Reporting and storytelling leaves stuff out so that we can follow a linear arc, but real life, as you live it, has all the twists and turns. So remembering the path isn't linear is helpful advice.

Another one that we've mentioned, college isn't the only next right thing. And if you don't know what your next step is, and if you are able, take your time. Many people mentioned taking a gap year before college was the best thing that they did, and that worrisome niggling in the back of your mind that, "Oh no, if I do that, I'm going to be late, or I'm going to be behind, or I'm not going to be on track with my class." Guess what? Once you graduate from high school, there is no class. You make your own class. So if you join people two years after high school and you decide to go to college then, that becomes your class. And that's okay. It's a whole new world once you leave the walls of that high school. And I think that's really good news.

Reader Elizabeth Zille asked an excellent question that you can ask your high school student. What problem do you want to solve? Not what do you want to do, or what do you want to study? But considering what problem you want to solve is a great question to ask yourself as a high school student, as you continue to make decisions about what you might want to do next. And I would add a question that Beth Silvers asked me one time, which was what do you want your days to look like? It's not too soon to ask a student what they want their days to look like in their life or career or family life or whatever.

That doesn't just have to mean in their job, what do you want your work days to look like? What do they really want their days to look like? Some of that might be unrealistic. Some of it might be extremely realistic. Or some of it might be just an exercise in creativity and in dreaming for the future with very little risk. So asking them, "What do you want your days to look like when you think about your life five years down the road," can be a helpful question.

Now if your student is choosing the college route, yes, look at the course of study, but also don't forget to pay attention to the town it's in, the size of the town, the proximity to family. If that school has sports teams, if that matters at all, sometimes it really matters. What the weather is in the town. If they have study abroad opportunities at the school. What the class sizes are. How far from home it is. If freshmen are allowed to have cars on campus. These are some questions that were helpful for us to know and ask

and things that we were wondering about. And maybe if the college is the next right thing for your student, then those are some helpful questions that you would want to consider.

Rachel McKee, another reader, who writes at Imprint of my Journey, had an excellent point. She said, “Your dream job might not exist yet.” And I thought in the world of tech and the fast moving world that we’re in right now, isn’t that the truth? So if you look around, kiddo, and you don’t see the path of what you want to do, the answer might actually lie within you, or you might be asked to wait and to pay close attention to the problems you want to solve and how you might best show up to solve them in a way that no one has done yet. Excellent question, Rachel, thanks for sharing that.

Well finally I want to share... This may or may not be helpful, but it could be a little bit of a mindset shift, and I would love if we would all just move our minds 1% more in this direction. And that is the idea of apprenticeship. In the past several years this is something that I’m becoming a huge fan of. It’s a model that we talk about a lot at Friends University, where I teach a few times a year, and it’s becoming my favorite way to learn. Apprenticeship is a way of being a leader in training with supervision and accountability and feedback, but without having all the responsibility of being the only one on deck.

So I think about this model of apprenticeship, and I think about scripture, I think of Moses and Joshua, Paul and Timothy, Jesus and his disciples. It’s the way Jesus chose to teach as he walked along the way. It often starts out looking like mentorship, but turns to apprenticeship as the responsibility to learn and to teach is shared among the apprenticed and the one who’s doing the apprenticing. So I just thought I’d throw that one in there. That could probably be its own episode and maybe will be in the future. But I don’t want us to overlook the value that can be found in, for example, internships that look like apprenticing and how much learning can take place there and how valuable that can be for students, especially at this stage of life.

Well that is a lot of words, my friends, and here’s the bottom line. As you walk with a student into their next right thing, it bears repeating to recognize that you’re also discerning your next right things, too. You always are. Depending on your role in their life, if you’re a parent or a guardian, a teacher or a coach, you have your own stuff you’re bringing to the decision table. But remember this is good work that you’re doing. You’re helping a fellow younger human discern and decide what might be next for them, even if it looks different than what was best for you. So let’s give them some space to explore, to make a choice and to learn from it, and to own them doing their own next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 225 of The Next Right Thing. I hope what’s worked for us can be helpful for you as you discern your next right thing and move to the rhythm of your own life, because it’s true this is a podcast about making decisions, but it’s also about making a life. As always you can find me on Instagram, where I ask all kinds of preliminary questions for podcast episodes sometimes. I’m there @EmilyPFreeman. You can also find me online where you can find this episode, but also transcripts of this and every episode at emilypfreeman.com. If it’s helpful, I have a one page download you can get it right now, you can get it for free. It’s called 10 Questions for Reflection and Discernment. I shared it before. It’s been a while, though.

But if you are, or know a student who feels stuck and they’re thinking about their future, you can download this one sheet, have them answer the questions about their last year of high school, for example, and see if they can discern any hidden longings or definite yeses or nos or personal core values that might want to emerge. You can find that at 10 Questions for Reflection and Discernment at emilypfreeman.com/10questions. That’s emilypfreeman.com/10questions. And it’s not specifically designed for high school students, but it is specifically designed for reflection and discernment for anyone who has a decision to make

Well in closing I want to share a portion of a caption from Jen Hatmaker that she shared on Instagram back in April, and it speaks so beautifully to this moment of decision that many of us find ourselves in. She says, “I have five kids, and with three launched and the next one imminent, not one of them has done it the same, and I’m pretty sure the fifth will have yet a different path.” The traditional high school to four year college plan certainly works for some kids, but it is 100% not a best practice approach for them all. It really isn’t. To say nothing of how many kids are graduating college with debilitating debt and a sluggish job market in their fields. So as graduation approaches here is to all the kids going to trade school, taking the community college route, taking a gap year, going straight into full-time work, enlisting in the military, going to beauty school, working abroad, recovering at home after two years of COVID high school, interning, apprenticing, entrepreneuring, going straight into the NBA. Those paths count too, and we celebrate them. Thanks for listening and I’ll see you next time.