



241: Write What You Know (And Other Life Advice)

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 241. 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. Before we get started, I wanted to highlight a book that explores daily life through the lens of liturgy, small practices, and the habits that form us. It's called *Liturgy of the Ordinary* by Tish Harrison Warren.

I've mentioned it here before. It's a book we can return to again and again to be greatly encouraged to find God in our ordinary moments, making our morning coffee, brushing our teeth, losing our keys. In *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish writes, "Alfred Hitchcock said movies are life with the dull bits cut out, car chases and first kisses, interesting plot lines and good conversations. We don't want to watch our lead character going on a walk, stuck in traffic, or brushing his teeth, at least not for long and not without a good soundtrack. We tend to want a Christian life with the dull bits cut out. Yet, God made us to spend our days and rest, work and play, taking care of our bodies, our families, our neighborhoods, our homes."

As listeners of The Next Right Thing, you already know it's these ordinary moments that are making our lives. I think you'll find Tish Harrison Warren to be a kind companion along the way. You can learn more about Tish's work and buy *Liturgy of the Ordinary* now from InterVarsity Press for 30% off. Visit ivpress.com and use the code "tish22" for 30% off *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. That's T-I-S-H22 for 30% off today. Now for today's episode. Listen in.

C. S. Lewis once said, to always prefer the plain direct word to the long vague one. Don't implement promises, but keep them. What's true for language can also be true for life. Why make something complicated when it can be simple instead?

My sister and I have this song we affectionately sing when we want to point out that the other one is making life more difficult than it needs to be. It has a single line of lyric, making life more difficult for myself, sung to a tune reminiscent of *She'll Be Coming Round The Mountain*, but not quite. When my sister pulls out this ridiculous line in the midst of my own spinning, it's a reminder for me to take a beat and explore where I might be complicating a process or a decision or adding a layer of unnecessary complexity. For sure it's true we don't always have agency over the complicated parts of our lives.

Maybe we usually don't, but that's why those things that I do have some control over, well, it's more important than ever to keep those things as simple as possible. Well, this is the time of year when I'm gearing up to get into more of a routine. Probably you're doing the same. For me, I'm looking forward to doing some more writing this season. I want to pull a page out of common advice given to writers

and share how some of that good writing advice is actually good life advice too. Here are a few ways I'm making life less difficult for myself, and maybe you can too. Number one, write what you know. Of course, at face value, this is advice for writers and it's advice I've taken over time.

More specifically in the last month or so, I've done this quite literally by sharing prayers and posts connected to sending our first born kiddos off to college, as that's what we've been doing at our house. As a maker and as a writer, I've learned that what they say is true. Writing what you know, well, that's where the most resonant writing comes from. It's from that space of experience, of deep knowing. It's made all the sense for me to bring forth the prayers I'm actually praying and the experience I'm actually having the last few months by sharing support and solidarity for the parents, caregivers, and guardians who are in a similar place as I am.

By sharing here the milestones I'm personally experiencing, it's helped me to simplify some of my creative thinking. I'm already in the headspace of reflecting on parenting, transitions, and saying goodbye. It makes sense to share that here as well. But the concept of write what you know doesn't only apply to writers. More broadly, we could say allow what you know to inform what you do and how you do it. What transferable skills do you already have that you can apply to your current work? Are there ways to bring something you're already working on in one area to help solve a complex problem in front of you?

Is it possible that what you're doing in the classroom, the boardroom, the office, or on the field can helpfully somehow inform a roadblock that you're facing in your volunteer work or as you plan your next vacation or in a conversation at the dinner table. Writing what I know is one way I've found to simplify my work during a time when I'm faced with a lot of things that I don't know. Number two, name what you don't know. In an article for Lithub, writer Emily Temple submits the question, "Should writers write what they know?" 31 authors weigh in. Well, some of those 31 authors are Dan Brown who says, "Write what you want to know." Lee Child says, "Write what you feel."

Sue Monk Kidd says, "Don't just write what you know." And Toni Morrison says, "You don't know anything." It's Toni Morrison for me. This is something she says she shared with her writing students, that as writers, we shouldn't be content to write only what we know, but that we could instead become curious people about the things that we don't know, because there's a lot of things that we don't know about people and events that we have no idea about.

Well, when it comes to taking this writing advice and applying it to the unknown in our daily lives, I found that instead of spiraling and despair about all the things I don't know, what's going to happen times infinity, it's a grounding practice for me to name what I don't know bullet point style. What do I not yet know, especially if there's a particular decision or expectation hanging over my head, what am I still questioning? Write it down. What feels so out of reach of the scope of my impact or influence that it's distracting me on the inside and keeping me from fully engaging in my life and work today? Name what you don't know. Write it down. List it out.

For me, this has helped the unknown to lose a bit of its smokey, ungraspable power. Write what you know. Name what you don't know. Finally, number three, keep your simple routines. They always tell writers to write every day. My friend Ann Kroeker reminds us, that doesn't have to be fancy. Instead, she says, we can practice our writing with writing what we're already doing, Instagram captions, emails, text messages, newsletters. Write with intention when we're writing these things that we're already doing every day and practice our writing on the daily. By the way, quick side note.

If you are a writer who wants to improve your craft and Croker just announced, she's teaching an eight week intensive called The Art and Craft of Writing that's going to be fantastic. I'll link to it in the show notes. But back to it. Over the last few months, as we've faced a lot of giant decisions and life milestones,

I found one way to make life less difficult for myself in my daily life is to hold on to my simple routines. I write one short page in my journal every day, mostly boring, terrible writing. I light a candle in the bathroom while I get ready as a reminder of the light of Christ with me wherever I go. I take my vitamins. I boil two eggs in the morning. I walk after dinner. I wash my face before bed.

These simple routines are not earth-shattering and they're not brain science or rocket surgery, but they keep me grounded in my next right thing, especially when schedules are changing, circumstances are tense, or when my heart and mind are working to process old narratives with new information. While life looms large with what abouts and question marks, here's to remembering what we know, to naming what we don't yet know, and to holding on to our simple routines as we continue to do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 241 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this practice of simplifying what you can will 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 our daily decisions are making our lives. Today, I'm pleased to announce the winner of that \$500 listener giveaway from our five year anniversary episode. Congratulations to listener Hannah Reeves. We've sent an email your way with how to claim your prize. Thank you to everyone who entered and celebrated with us. That five year anniversary was super fun. Hopefully if you did enter, you received your freebie, the 10 Questions for Reflection & Discernment.

You can still get that freebie even though the giveaway is closed. Just click the link in the show notes, and it will lead you straight there. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com. That's also where you can find a transcript of this and every episode we've ever done. A big thanks to Leah Jarvis for doing our show notes and ensuring transcripts are available to all who need them and to the team at Unmutable for their good work in editing every episode. In closing, a word from author Shauna Niequist who wrote in her book *I Guess I Haven't Learned That Yet*, "Joy and celebration are practices for the long haul." May it be so in and among us. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.