



## 244: When A Public Figure Dies

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 244.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, with 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, I'll share a few things I think about when a public figure dies, prompted by the death of Queen Elizabeth II. This is not an episode about her life or legacy necessarily, but because so often the news of the passing of a public figure, no matter how far removed from us, can be both sobering and disruptive. I thought it was worth an episode for us to pause and consider this strange dynamic of reckoning with the loss of a public figure and why I believe it's important that we do so. Listen in.

\*\*\*

Last week, on the morning of September 8th, I sat with my friend and Lazy Genius Kendra, co-working in a coffee shop, and I saw the headline that doctors were concerned about the health of Queen Elizabeth II. Just a few short hours later when we had just finished lunch, but before dessert arrived, we saw the news that Queen Elizabeth II, the longest reigning British monarch in history had died at age 96.

I'm a woman in my mid-40s who lives in the East Coast of the United States of America. I've never lived in the UK or in any country in the Commonwealth, though I have visited England exactly twice. I did not grow up singing God save the Queen, or having her face on my money. I'm a person who knows and is continually learning about how the existence of the monarchy represents a complicated and dark history of oppression. I also confess I'm a sucker for a magazine with a member of the Royal Family on the cover.

I was a toddler when Princess Diana and Prince Charles got married, back when I thought her first name was Lady and her last name was Die. I looked up to her because she was a beautiful princess living a fairytale, an unfair and untrue narrative that was assigned to her from the very beginning. From where I sat as a girl living in the United States in the 1980s, the Queen of England was a secondary background figure, and the matter of her living forever seemed a foregone conclusion. She celebrated her platinum jubilee the year I was born. She always was and always would be, but Diana at the time was the rising star. No need to recount the history we all know, except to say the night they announced the death of Diana I was 20 and I was in college living at home. I was up late in North Carolina watching TV in my parents' living room when the news broke from an early morning in Paris. A special report about her accident and then her death. At the time, Princess William and Harry were only 15 and 12 respectively.

Twenty years later, we would hear from a grown up Prince Harry about how shocking and strange it was for him to follow the casket of his mother as they walked solemnly through the streets of London on the day of her funeral. And in 2017, in the HBO documentary about her life called *Diana, Our Mother*, he

said, “It was very, very strange after her death, the sort of outpouring of love and emotion from so many people that had never even met her. And I was thinking to myself, how is it that so many people that never even met this woman, my mother, can be crying and showing more emotion than I actually am feeling.”

When it comes to grieving the loss of a public figure, none of us wants to be the person who insults the family with our public display. None of us wants to be grabby with grief over someone we don’t even really know. So what is our next right thing when a public figure dies? Well, as you know, it depends. Depends on lots of things. In the case of the death of Queen Elizabeth, some feel this loss in a deeply personal way. I watched the news along with probably many of you, hours after her death was announced, as a US reporter stuck a microphone in front of Londoners standing on the street, and many of them were people who were older than I am who grew up in England, repeating phrases like: “She’s always been there, she’s the only queen we’ve ever known.” For others, her death has brought to the surface the pain and harm caused by British colonization. For history, her death marks the end of an historic reign and the ushering in of a new era.

How we reckon with the loss of a public figure depends on the age of the one who dies, the manner of their death, and the degree to which we paid attention to their work. And it depends on us, our experience and perception of this person and their impact on our individual lives and on the arc of history. When someone who seemed larger than life stops living, there’s often a collective pause and there should be.

A few years after the death of Princess Diana, we were on vacation at the beach when we heard about John F. Kennedy Jr.’s plane crash. Later that night, while his plane was still missing, we went out to dinner near the harbor. The restaurant hushed in respectful shock, whispering behind the back of one of the waitresses because she looked exactly like his wife, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, who was traveling with him and who we later learned died by his side.

The first time I stood on the edge of public grief was walking home from the bus stop after school when I was in elementary school and my sister told me that the space shuttle, the Challenger, had exploded that day. I was eight and the first thing I remember thinking was how that couldn’t be true because Christa McAuliffe was on that shuttle and she was just an ordinary teacher.

In the winter of 1999, John and I went to see Patch Adams starring Robin Williams. It was our first real date. The night we had a long talk after the movie was over in the parking lot of the theater, answering questions like, “Do you like me? Is this a thing between us?” All with nervous chewing of Twizzlers and secret dreaming of the rest of our lives. But then 15 years later, we found ourselves on our own sofa with our three kids in our house with our dog and a borrowed kitten at the time, and we watched Jumanji, also starring Robin Williams. As soon as the movie was over that night, I checked my phone and saw the news that he had died and there was that familiar ache again, the sadness and disorientation that comes when you hear tragic, shocking news.

Robin Williams, Christa McAuliffe, John F. Kennedy Jr., and now Queen Elizabeth II, they weren’t part of my life, but their art, their legacy, their contribution, complications, and in some cases their mistakes and missteps, well, they all in some ways colored the backdrop of mine and of yours. For me, they intersected at the bus stop, on my first real date with my now husband, during a family movie night, watching a royal wedding.

When someone shares their art, their work, their generosity, or their life of service with the world, they share a bit of themselves for better or for worse. And so some things that might be important to practice when a public figure dies, well, we’ll find ways to tell our own small stories of distant connection and experience with that person. We’ll watch the newscast and the tributes. We’ll scroll through the timelines of milestone moments in the life of the one who died. We may stand outside significant buildings leaving

a note, a prayer or a bouquet. Maybe we'll write a post, tell a story, or share a perspective of what we learned from their life, how we were impacted, how their life mattered, or even what we believe they got wrong. We'll recognize no matter who they were, their humanity is what gives them dignity, not their station, status, heritage or fame.

We'll also as writer Marcie Alvis-Walker wrote about the death of Queen Elizabeth II in particular, an Instagram post last week. She said, "We'll refuse to demonize or idolize their life," acknowledging that one person is not only all good, just as they are not ever only all bad. It's important to acknowledge any moments, even small ones that may have been marked by the life and legacy of this person who has now died, even though we did not know them personally, but who has in some way been part of our collective history. A life that is to be both honored and examined, perhaps we'll whisper prayers. For sure, we'll consider the fleeting nature of life with humility. May we reflect on our own legacies and how the choices we are all making now will leave a particular world behind.

In the end, I think an important thing to remember when a public figure dies is that they are not in fact a public figure, not really. When they take their final breath on this earth, as with us, they are a human figure, a person made in the divine image of God, loved and beloved, both fragile and strong. In the words of the venerable David Stanton, Canon in Residence at Westminster Abbey who spoke on the day we visited in the summer of 2018, "Do you ever find yourself wondering if you love God? Don't fret about that. Just remember, God is in love with you." And that really is an astonishing thought. As we consider the life and the death of a public figure, may this be what we remember above all else, that they were loved, that they were made in the image of God, and may that continue to be an astonishing thought.

\*\*\*

Thanks for listening to episode 244 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of pausing when a public figure dies 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, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a transcript of this and every episode we've ever done. Thanks to Leah Jarvis who does our show notes for us and makes sure those transcripts are available. And also a special thanks as always to the team at Unmutable who edits the sound for every episode.

I wanted to close with a prayer written by Ted Loder in his book, *Guerrillas of Grace*.

O God, turn your Spirit loose now, and me with it, that I may go to where the edge is, to face with you the shape of my mortality: the inescapable struggle and loneliness and pain which remind me that I am less than god after all, that you have made me with hard limits, limits to my strength, my knowledge, my days.

Facing those limits, Lord, grant me grace to live to the limit of being unflinchingly alive, irrepressibly alive, fully alive, of experiencing every fragile, miraculous, bloody, juicy, aching, beautiful ounce of being a human being; of doing my duty and a little more; of loving the people around me, my friends and my enemies; of humbling myself to take others seriously and delightedly; of applying my heart to the wisdom of simplicity, the freedom of honesty.

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