



246: The Mindset Shift That's Changing My Work

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 246. This is a podcast about making decisions and 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 distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. As one season slowly unfolds into the next, I'm paying attention to some of my personal work and life rhythms, and have discovered one thing that's been holding me back from my own next right thing. Maybe it's holding you back too.

A heads up about this episode. It might only apply to a certain subset of listeners, specifically those of us who work from home, which I guess now as I say that, I realize might actually be a lot of us. But it also may apply best to those who have the luxury of and are responsible for setting your own schedule. If that's not you, perhaps there's still a little something here that will help you discern your own next right thing in your work and life. Listen in.

Throughout my life, I've lived in several regions of the United States, as far north as Michigan and as far south as South Carolina. Winters in Michigan were welcome in December, at least to me, they were. That is until they seem to last all the way through April, delaying the new life of springtime, with piles of dirty snow lining our neighborhood streets. But then hope would return when we would get the lovely summertime in Michigan, a kinder presence than the ones that I was used to when I lived in the southeast. The year before my senior year of high school, we moved from South Carolina to Michigan, and we lived right outside of Detroit. And I got a summer job at a day camp for kids, and so most of my work was outside. I'll get so tan, I thought. Outside all day, I thought. But I would come home each day that summer and I would check my tan line, and it was just a regular amount of sun with a whisper of a tan line, and I couldn't figure it out.

And that's when I learned about the angle of the sun and that a Michigan sun is much less severe than a Carolina sun. In the Southeast, our thick humidity and hot Septembers often have us begging for mercy by the time October arrives. And when I lived in South Carolina, the heat could persist even longer through October. But the majority of my life has been spent in either friendly Southern Indiana, where I was born and spent most of my childhood, or the beautiful Piedmont of North Carolina with our green leafy shade trees and our day trips to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the west or the waters of the Outer Banks in the east. Now, both Indiana and North Carolina enjoy a full expression of every season, spring, summer, winter, and autumn, though the onset and departure of each of those seasons varies.

As we roll into the seasonal shift once again now, as the afternoon light spills through the windows differently, as the trees begin their colorful transformation and the air crisps up in the morning and the evenings, and as our daily routines come back online, I've been paying attention to how the outward

transformations of nature mirror some of my own inner transformations in my soul, particularly as they relate to my work. Last week, I asked my sister at the end of a phone call, “Oh, okay, well, I’ll talk to you later. And also, by the way, how do we get work done again?” And I was joking, but I was also serious, because with this new season, it seems a lot of things have changed for me. Maybe they’ve changed for you too.

As I’ve shared here, and if you follow me on Instagram or if you subscribe to my monthly letter, then you’ve likely heard me say once or 10 times how this year has brought for us a fair amount of transition, buying and selling a house, sending two of our three kids to college. Our youngest got his driver’s license this summer, and I’ve been making some pretty big decisions in my work life that have brought a lot of shifts in my schedule and my daily rhythm of life. As we move forward into this season, I’ve mostly had a welcoming posture toward the changes in my schedule, but I’ve recognized something in myself, especially now that school started back for the kids, and that is that my schedule has changed, but my mindset has not. Maybe you can relate.

For example, I’ve shared here before about how I’m a maker, but I’ve been working on a manager’s schedule for many years. I have an entire episode about that if you want to learn more about it. It’s called Why Makers Struggle to Get Things Done, it’s episode 185. And it was inspired by an essay written by Paul Graham called Maker’s Schedule, Manager’s Schedule. Now, when we’re talking about having a manager’s schedule, that doesn’t mean that you have to literally be a manager in your job description. But those who operate using a manager style of work, divide their time in one hour increments throughout the day and can switch from task to meetings with less effort. To create a schedule, someone who uses this type of mindset, a manager mindset, just would block off their time by the hour and then divide their tasks and meetings up by eight, and then boom, a full eight hours worth of a day’s work.

Much of the working world operates this way. The way of the manager’s schedule is the default. In fact, maybe you’re hearing me describe that style of working and you’re wondering what I’m actually talking about. “That’s not a style, Emily. That’s called a job.” I used to think I was deficient or just a procrastinator, or maybe I was lazy because I couldn’t figure out how to work well that way. Now, over time, I’ve exercised my manager muscle and I’ve gotten pretty good at functioning at a high level with that type of schedule. So, I just want to say to be clear, there’s nothing wrong with that kind of scheduling. It’s not a bad way to schedule your life or your work. But for some of us, doing it that way comes at a high cost, and I was relieved to learn there’s another way.

That other way is the schedule of the maker, and that’s a person who needs longer periods of time to get deep thinking and creative work done. And it’s not because something’s wrong with them, it’s just the type of work that they do or are called to do or feel most gifted in, takes a different type of mindset, and in essence, a different type of scheduling. And for that person, one meeting can throw an entire day. Now, of course, makers don’t always have the luxury of entire days to work and long runways to do that work, but isn’t it a relief to at least have a name for a way of working that aligns with your deepest contribution? If you struggle to get things done, it could be because you’re a maker trying to work on a manager’s schedule.

Sometimes I wonder what the world is missing out on because we’ve elevated one way of productivity above all other ways. That’s something I think about a lot, but that’s a conversation for another day. Because for now, here’s where I’m camping out and what I wanted to talk with you about. With the recent changes in schedule that have happened in my own life and maybe in yours, I realize now I have more freedom to set up my calendar in a way that sings really well with my personal way of working. But the unexpected resistance I’m experiencing is coming from a source that I did not know to look out for, and that is my very own self.

I'm hesitant to step fully into my maker ways in this new season, and I think it's because my schedule has changed, but my mindset has not. And so, as I have been evaluating the last several weeks, what would a maker's schedule look like for me now? I have resistance to entering fully into it because it doesn't look or feel as productive as a manager schedule. There, I said it. I'm hesitant to let go of a long checked off to-do list in exchange for the one or two items that will require more of my attention, more of my focus, and maybe even more of my gifting, but might not give me as much instant gratification at the end of the day.

So, I'm a maker, but I also like to finish things. And a manager's schedule lends itself so well to small wins throughout the day with a lot of tasks to show for. So, I find myself drawn to the smaller tasks that might not be as important, but at least I can check them off. And so, with longer form work that requires deep thinking and clearer focus, the payoffs might be more gratifying in the end, but they come much less often, which leaves me stuck knowing how to set up my work days in a way that can sustainably carry me forward for the long haul. I hope you're following along with me. And I wish we could sit down in person and talk about this type of weird, nuanced, very specific struggle, but it's important for me to name it.

Because I can shake my fist at the way of the world not valuing the contributions of those of us who work differently, but then I have to honestly confront how deeply I've internalized the way of the manager and elevated it in many ways above the way of the maker, at least when it comes to finishing the work. Now, you might be asking, "Do I have a solution for us," especially if you too are standing in the threshold of a new project or a changing schedule or a fresh opportunity to create. Well, the answer for you is, maybe. "How about a partial solution for me?" I'll take it. It starts with naming, as discerning our next right thing always does. It's grounding to name where we are before discerning where we're going, even in something as small and somewhat mundane as our daily schedule.

You can start by naming anything you want, it will all be helpful. You could name what's life giving or life draining, what's the best and worst things that could happen? For me, in the situation, I decided to name what I now have more of and what I have less of now that some of the things have changed in my life. So, I'm making a more and less list. So, that's the first movement here, make a more and less list. And for me, that looks like this. I have more time, more creative energy, more emotional white space, more conviction, but about less things. Practically, I have less meetings. My daily work requires less input from a team. I strangely have both more and less confidence in my own ideas, voice, and calling. Someone riddle me that.

You could name where you are too. What do you have more and less of? Where specifically do you feel stuck? In the most perfect of imaginary worlds, what do you want your days to look like? These are ways of naming where we are. After naming my mores and my lesses, I've moved on to something that I practiced several years ago that was helpful and I'm now returning to, and that is number two, establishing theme days. I first talked about this way back in episode 76, so long ago. At that time, I set up theme days as a solution to actually the opposite problem I have right now. At that time, I had an extremely limited amount of time and a plethora of different types of tasks and jobs that I needed to tackle and to complete.

And so, as I tried to manage the ever growing to-do list back then, switching between tasks got me nowhere. And having to decide again every single day, what am I going to work on today, from an impossibly long list of options led to a lot of discouragement and a lot of decision fatigue. And so, a solution I found at that time was to organize my time based on a theme for the day, and that worked better than organizing my time based on a particular type of task. Now, some people might find they prefer to do, for example, all their writing work on one day, and then on another day all their admin work, and maybe another day all the emailing on another day. But to me, that's kind of more like batching, grouping like tasks together to reduce the amount of task switching that you have to do.

But for me, that wasn't my struggle. That didn't solve the problem that I had because the difficulties for

me come, not so much in switching between types of tasks, but in switching between concepts, creative vision, purpose, and direction. So, I would personally rather do all podcast work on one day, including the writing, the admin, the recording, all of it, and then know I don't have to think about the podcast again until the next podcast theme day. Well, now here's the deal, I have a lot more time. And so, I'm finding theme days are a tougher sell, because the more time I have, guess what? The more time I take. Parkinson's law in it's full expression, work expands to fill the time allotted for its completion. Don't I know it's true?

When my schedule was more full, I would, for example, have Mondays as my podcast day, and I had to finish on Monday because I had so much other work to do the rest of the week. It was my one chance. But now, technically, I have the space to work on the podcast more days of the week. Instead of leaving me more time to do other kinds of deep work, I'm noticing the podcast work is starting to creep in to other days, and it's taking me longer to complete. I do not love this. And so, now I'm tasked with finding a new way of thinking about my work. Theme days can still be helpful, but I'm trying to figure out how to embrace my maker mindset without sabotaging momentum.

And so, number three, this is partial solution number three, which is the mindset shift. The mindset shift that's saving my work for now is one that moves me from a perfected productivity mindset to a practiced alignment mindset. And so, what I mean by that is when my mind is focused primarily on productivity, one of two things ends up happening for me. I might get stuff done, but I often might do so at the expense of my best work, or I get a lot of the wrong things done because I want to be productive, but it's not necessarily the work that is the most important work to be doing.

Or on the flip side, when I'm in that productivity mindset, I must be productive, if I'm not getting a whole lot done and I give myself true permission to take the space I believe the task needs, but then I look up and I realize it's been a while, and then I start to panic and I might revert back to feeling ashamed of the ways that I work or wearing my manager hat and point an accusatory finger at my maker ways, it's a hot mess. And sometimes we have to put on that productivity hat to actually get the thing done, and I realize that is true. But right now, just for this season, I have a little bit more of a luxury to shift my mindset from the productivity, perfected productivity to one of practiced alignment.

And so, what that means for me is a few things. It includes revisiting my own personal and business core values, adjusting them where they need adjusting, reviewing them to remind myself why I'm doing this work and who I'm doing it for. And that word, practice is important because it implies flexibility, openness, and even the invitation to play. I might not have yet figured out how to get everything done at a certain amount of time in this new season of my life, as time stretches out a little bit before me in ways that I haven't experienced for many years. But I am learning right now to lay the groundwork and to orient myself in a better way. This week, I'm naming my mores and my lesses. I'm still choosing theme days for my work, but I'm also shifting from productivity being my highest priority and replacing that with alignment.

Not to pit them against each other and not to say that being productive is not important, but it isn't the most important thing for me right now. I'm not replacing productivity, but I'm just prioritizing alignment, putting them in their proper order. What kind of schedule works for the life I'm being invited to live? This author, Greg McKeown has taught us in his book *Essentialism*, he says, "We aren't looking for a plethora of good things to do, we're looking for our highest level of contribution, the right thing, the right way, the right time. Essentialists spend as much time as possible exploring, listening, debating, questioning, and thinking, but their exploration is not an end in itself. The purpose of exploration is to discern the vital few from the trivial many."

And so, for me, changing my mindset from one valuing productivity above all else to elevating alignment

has been a life saving principle in my work. I wonder if there's a mindset shift that's helping you in your own work today. So, here's to you and to me, as we honestly confront the unique challenges of new seasons, as we explore new ways of working and of being, as we exercise kindness and compassion toward ourselves as we learn, and as we see all the ways God shows up in every kind of growth, even if it looks very different than what we thought. Here's to doing our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 246. Well, I hope this simple practice of shifting your mindset 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 that our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman and online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find a transcript of this and every episode, thanks to Leah Jarvis who does our transcripts and our show notes. And also, a special thanks and shout out to the team at Immutable who edits our audio every single week.

In closing, here's another word from Greg McKeown, from his book, *Essentialism*, "An essentialist produces more, brings forth more by removing more, instead of doing more. Often, we don't take the time to really think about which efforts will produce results and which will not. But even when we do, it is easier to think of execution in terms of addition, rather than subtraction. If we want to sell more products, then we get more sales people. If we want to produce more output, then we ramp up production. There's clearly evidence to support this approach, however, there is another way to think of improving results. Instead of focusing on the efforts and resources we need to add, the essentialist focuses on the constraints or obstacles we need to remove." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.