



250: One Secret to a Light(er) Heart

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 250.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also 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 also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Well, hopefully you know by now that just doing the next right thing is not something that's necessarily going to protect us from harm, regret, or embarrassment, but hopefully it can be a practice that keeps us present, moving, and from being too hard on ourselves. Listen in.

In his book, *Souvenirs of Solitude*, author Brennan Manning tells a story about having a disturbing phone call right before he was scheduled to speak to inmates at a local prison. He writes, "I left the monastery to give a talk at Trenton State Prison and began with the outrageous greeting: 'Well, it's nice to see so many of you here.'" He writes about this experience saying, "Frequently not in form, on top or in control, that is part of my poverty as a human being. And self-acceptance without self-concern simply expresses a reality. An impoverished spirit prevents the poor man from being a tyrant to himself." Again, those are words from author Brennan Manning in his book *Souvenirs of Solitude*, and they resonate with me, and maybe with you too, because in my attempts to live my life, often there are just those things we get all the way wrong, well intended, perhaps even well rehearsed and even planned for. So what do we do when we may be well versed and practicing our next right thing, but we still keep putting our foot in our mouth, making silly mistakes, or embarrassing ourselves all over again?

When I read that Brennan Manning welcomes the inmates by telling them how glad he was that there were so many of them there, I laughed out loud. More I was struck by his lack of self-consciousness about it. There was no ringing of hands or heavy anxiety for having misspoken. There was no shock over his ill-timed comment or even any evidence, at least not in the writing, that he had shame about his own lack of thought. We can assume his comment didn't keep him up that night. There was only an acceptance of the reality of his own frailty, accompanied by his refusal to hate himself for it. And there's a child likeness to this that I would like to learn or perhaps relearn. There's a simplicity that harkens back to our original simplicity when we were very small before we knew to be embarrassed by misspeaking, stumbling, falling or failing. Embarrassment is what we learned by watching how others reacted to us, and boy did we learn fast.

I have vague memories of being very young, maybe four or five, and I was aware in my memory that adults were watching me probably pointing out something, maybe even cute or clever, but in my memory they were laughing and I don't remember cute cleverness. All I remember are their faces and what felt like

judgment and what led to shame. Note to my small self, if you stay quiet, they can't laugh at you.

You learned it too in your own way about your own things. Were the adults really laughing at me? Who can say maybe, sometimes, probably mostly not, at least no more than how I laughed at the child likeness of my own children when they would do things that delighted me. But the reality is that we all know by now, is children are great recorders of information, but terrible interpreters. They remember what happened, but they don't know what it meant. And so we live our lives in protection mode trying to avoid misstepping, misspeaking, mistakes and misery. Thank God we don't have to stay there.

What Brennan Manning illustrates with his prison welcome story is a vision of a new simplicity, a second innocence, one that can only come ironically with growing up not just in terms of age, but in terms of true maturity and deep transformation. It's the Oliver Wendell Holmes' concept displayed in real life who writes, "For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give you a fig, but for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that, I would give you anything I have."

What draws me to the story of Brennan's? Yes, I'm calling him Brennan now and no, I'm not done talking about this. It's the beauty and attraction of the simplicity on the other side of complexity, what could also be described as not taking ourselves too seriously precisely because we have done the work of taking ourselves deeply seriously, our stories, our woundedness, our belovedness. And so this is a lightheartedness that comes from finally knowing who we are in our deep down core and of being mostly profoundly okay with her, but it takes work and you already know this. And I have found some unlikely companions in this work. You'll never guess who one of them is. If you've read my book *Simply Tuesday*, then you're likely familiar with this reflection. How we are in many ways conditioned to root for the little guy, but no one wants to be him in real life.

When I think about my own childhood heroes, they are underdog adjacent, but they always end up winning in the end. As important as it is to have heroes we look up to, maybe it's equally important to have heroes we look over at. And that brings one of mine to mind. Cartoonist Charles Schulz says it like this, "Charlie Brown must be the one who suffers because he's a caricature of the average person. Most of us are much more acquainted with losing than winning." And so it's one thing to create a hero who's lovable, admirable, dashing, yet somehow flawed and relatable. It's a whole nother thing to create a layered character, especially a cartoon one, who's chronically embarrassed, rejected and made to look like a fool, but still have him come out as the one we're rooting for. But that's what Charles Schulz did with Charlie Brown. We can relate to him and his embarrassment often at his own expense. Still, the kid never gives up. Charlie Brown doesn't ride in on a white horse or save the world in a blue cape, but he endures in the midst of everyday difficulty, and that's the kind of hope most of us need.

We need to know how to carry on as the manager of the team, even when the team keeps losing. We want to hope that it's possible to trust people again, even though the football has been pulled away more times than we can count. We want to believe that love is still an option, even though the little redheaded girl doesn't look our way. Despite all odds and disappointment, we still want to dare to hold out our trick or treat bag even when all we get is a rock. True hope doesn't come from good results. Positive outcomes are sure wins. The hope that is deep and enduring is knowing we're going to be okay even if the results and outcomes aren't a win. And so in that way, I like to think of Charlie Brown as a hero for the soul, not a Friday night light kind or a weekend warrior kind, but a regular simply Tuesday kind of hero, one we can all relate to. He makes embarrassment okay, even endearing. He gives me permission to be small and humble, but also inspires me to persevere.

When I think of the incarnation of Christ, the humanness of the divine, we can name the miracles and think of wine from water, sight from blindness, life coming after death, but our Tuesdays need miracles too, and that often looks like the compassionate presence of God, turning my shock into a confession and

my shame into laughter and a lightheart. This is part of what simplicity on the other side of complexity can look like. I hope this reflection inspires you to perhaps choose your own unlikely heroes, not the untouchable Swoop owners, but the real heroes of the everyday variety. And so even if you stand up this week in front of a large group of inmates announcing your gladness that the crowd is so big, or if you fall for the cute redhead who doesn't fall back, may we all have the audacity to not take it so personal. May we accept our frailty but not despise ourselves for it, and may we continue to move into our next right thing, even though as we know, sometimes we'll get it wrong.

Thanks for listening to episode 250 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of finding your own unlikely heroes 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, well, they're making our lives. This fall marks the seven-year anniversary of the book I mentioned in this episode, *Simply Tuesday*, the one where I share these stories and more all about small moment living in a fast-moving world. You can learn more about that book at simplytuesday.com or just visit emilypfreeman.com and click on books in the top navigation. There you can also find a transcript of this and every episode of *The Next Right Thing*, thanks to Leah Jarvis who does our show notes and make sure that we have those transcripts every week.

And also, I want to say a shout out to the team at Unmutable who edits our audio every single week so that I don't sound quite so disjointed. Thank you very much.

Well, one more thing I wanted to mention before I share our closing quote is that if you subscribe to my newsletter, you already know that I have... Well, I am in the process of reimagining ways to communicate via email with listeners and readers. And one of those ways is instead of sending out an email every week, right now I'm only doing a monthly email. It goes out on the last day of every month, so there's still time to sign up to get that email before the end of this month. I'll send it out, like I said, on the final day of... As we are in October right now.

I always share books I'm reading now, I'll share three questions for you to reflect on the month you just lived before moving in to the next month, but mostly I'll share first word news and reflection that I really don't share anywhere else on the internet. So I hope that you'll sign up for that. All you have to do is go to emilypfreeman.com/letter. You'll be the first to know when things are happening, and let me just say there's some things happening, so I hope that you'll sign up. It's always an honor to have you trust me with your email, and I really try to respect that trust and send you only the good stuff.

In closing, here are a few words from Macrina Wiederkehr in her book, *Seasons of Your Heart*. "I would not choose to become a child again, but I am looking to children and searching in them for a simplicity and ordinariness that makes being an adult easier to accept and miracles, easier to see."

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