



261: Where Trouble Melts Like Lemon Drops: A Story

I am Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 261.

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. Sometimes I'll share tips or interviews here. Other times I'll tell a story. Today's a story day and I hope you'll find something in it to inform your next right thing. Listen in.

I got the text in September. I was in Goshen, Indiana, with my dear friend Shannon Martin for our annual writing retreat. That started back in 2014 when I was writing my fourth book, *Simply Tuesday*. I needed to go back to my own hometown roots in southern Indiana to soak around my history to find some words that lived there that couldn't be found anywhere else. But Shannon lived in Indiana, so we figured it would be a fun time to meet up, and we did. We each got our own hotel room because if we shared one, we would likely never get any work done. But after hours of writing alone, we would join up over some nachos, chatted up about all the things, walk around long enough to feel city-like, and then we'd go back to our rooms, write for hours again until it was time to eat again.

We liked that rhythm so much in 2014 that we did again in 2015. This time she came down my way. And nearly each year after that, we've traded traveling to each other and over the years we found less time to write and more time to eat. And that was most true this past September when it was my turn to travel her way.

So now it's 2022, and Shannon and I are sitting in her car on a warm Indiana September night, right outside of Goshen Brewing Company, and that's when I get a text from John. A couple that he's been meeting with asked him to officiate their wedding. "It's December 1st," they said, "and it's on Maui. Bring your wife, we'll fly you both." I read the text out loud to Shannon, not even considering asking John if he wanted to say yes. Her face immediately lights up, "You're going to Hawaii." Maybe you would've jumped right up at the chance to go to Hawaii. I would've too if it was you telling the story, but the practicalities of leaving the Monday after Thanksgiving and being gone nearly a week and 11 total hours on a plane just to get there one way, and, and, and. It's funny the good things we talk ourselves out of. I'm not saying these kinds of things are always a yes or always should be a yes, but I am saying that sometimes the practicals can get in the way of what we really want to do.

"Shannon, no. It's right after Thanksgiving. We would get back and it would be Christmas. I have a strict no travel in December rule that I made for a reason, and if I said to John we're not doing it, then he would've said, 'Okay, we're not doing it.'" But she stares me down and she repeats my own words back to me, but with a whole different tone. "That's right. You would get back and it would be Christmas. Emily,

you're going to Hawaii. The end."

I laugh. I should text back to John, "Shannon says we should go." And I don't think about it another minute until I fly home days later, but that Shannon thinks we should go open the door enough for conversation. So when I do get back home, John and I talk about it and decide that yes, we're going to Hawaii, but I was nervous for all the reasons I've said, but also because I don't love to fly much less for a flight all the way across the country, plus half the Pacific Ocean. We flew directly on a flight from Atlanta to Maui. We wouldn't be there super long and John would of course be working part of the time, but he wanted for us to at least do one Hawaii specific thing while we were there, besides just the obvious, it's a luxury to be in Hawaii at all.

So he booked a stargazing tour for us, the first one like that we've ever done. They say it's one of the best places to see the stars in the whole world. So we drove to the top of Haleakala, the highest point in Maui at over 10,000 feet above sea level. It's the kind of journey you take in a car where you gradually rise, long switchbacks weaving you closer to the top. The scene changing around you from small town road lined with tall trees, to fields with grass and cows, sometimes standing right in the middle of the road, to gray, smokey fog, to low rocky vegetation, to finally emerging from the gray fog into the wild blue above you past the point where trees can grow. And now you're looking down on the clouds, an airplane view from the ground, except you're not on an airplane, you're in a rental on a road on Maui driving up.

That was the most unexpected part of the whole trip to the top of the volcano. It was driving through what I call fog, and then emerging through and realizing it isn't the kind of fog I'm used to, but that's a straight-up cloud, fluffy and friendly. And now you're in your car looking at the top of that cloud while you had been moments earlier just driving along a road like a normal human person. But this is no normal human person thing to do, driving above clouds. And so reality is already suspended on top of that volcano. So everything after just feels like a gift.

So we get to the top with our little caravan of cars led by our tour leader Jan, who's our stargazing tour guide, and she tells us to meet back in an hour, which means we have time to explore the summit, to sit and stare out at the clouds below us, the vast sky above us and beyond us. While there, I get a FaceTime call from our son who's home alone watching a movie five hours in the future. We chat for a few minutes and again, it's a dream, him at home halfway around the world in the dim light of our familiar living room, the dog licking his paws in the background. And I'm here on this volcano rock, my face orange from the rapidly sinking sun, the same one that sat in North Carolina hours ago. Thousands of feet here I am above Hawaii, standing next to John, who's watching my face to make sure all is well back home.

When we confirm that it is, we meet our group back at our spot, drive a short ways down the summit to a more shadowed area of the volcano, still at the top, but without the crowds. The sun has set now and it's dark, though there's still a dark blue glow where the sun used to be. Jan gets to work fast, opens the back of her van, hands out gloves, coats, snow pants. It was warm at sea level when we left, but it's winter now at 10,000 feet and it's hard to focus when you're cold, at least it is for me. We sit in a semicircle around the telescope as tall as I am. As she looks through it, quickly measures, adjusts, looks again, and then she calls us up one by one, "Hurry now," to begin to see what we can see.

Over the next hour, we look through the viewfinder and take turns seeing Jupiter and three moons, Saturn's rings, a small red Mars. We see the brightest moon like a spotlight in the viewfinder, craters clear as if they were just 10 feet away. We see Andromeda, which is a distant galaxy, we see three open star clusters. But while that moon is beautiful, its light illuminates the night and we can only see a faint Milky Way. It's no matter. We've already driven a car above the clouds. We watched the sun sink into them, turning the whole world pink and orange. We've already seen so much more than I've seen with my eyes before and I'm so happy to have been there. I'm so glad I said yes.

Weeks later, after we arrive home, I go visit my spiritual director and at the end of our time together, I pull out a small rock I picked up for her from the beach. She's even more delighted than I thought she would be. And I tell her about our stargazing tour. "We saw the rings of Saturn," I say, "the rings. It actually looked like a cartoon sticker of Saturn, what you think it ought to look like." We chat a bit as I'm leaving and I can tell she deeply appreciates the galaxy talk.

As I'm ready to walk out the door, she casually mentions that she recently saw Saturn's rings too from a telescope in the parking lot of our local library. The library where I took my kids to check out books they didn't want when they were tiny. The library from where I uploaded the very first episode of this podcast. The library where I wrote one of my book proposals. The library where I ran into a mom of older kids from my neighborhood. And when she asked me how I was doing, I surprised myself with tears because I told her, "Having your kids grow up and go to middle school is really hard and kind of sad. And no one really told me it would be." And she was kind and understood and said it would get better, and I believed her and she was right.

So in the parking lot of that library, sometimes they pull out a telescope and when they do, you can see Saturn's rings. Turns out you don't have to go to Hawaii to see the magic of the sky. I didn't have to travel 4,000 miles away from home and 10,000 feet above sea level to see the rings of Saturn. I could see them from my own library with the right equipment. And of course I knew this, of course I did. But it was a moment for me there at the end of a rich conversation with my spiritual director, a moment that I'm holding onto here in the new year to remember that wonder is always here.

Fast forward a few more weeks to two weeks ago. I'm spending the night at our mountain house and I get another text from John. This time he's at Costco. "They have telescopes here on sale, probably trying to get rid of them after Christmas," he writes. "Get it," I say. "I don't know if it's a good one," he says. "Just get it." And so he does. And days later, I'm on the sofa and I hear John call to me from the back deck and tells me to come look. So I'm standing in my sock feet on a mild January night looking up at the hazy sky in our backyard. "Look, look right in there," he says, pointing to the eyepiece on our now fully put together telescope. I lean in, shut one eye and see what I can see. There in the viewfinder is the moon, 77% illuminated, hanging bright in the darkness, surface sharp, craters deep. There is the moon in my own backyard, not quite as clear as we saw on Haleakala, but close, so close. And it was another moment for me to see what's in front of me without believing the myth I have to go far away for it.

And so I'm Dorothy waking up at Auntie Ann's house, recounting my pilgrimage to Oz, remembering that maddening charlatan behind the curtain who couldn't or wouldn't give me what I really want, until finally in a moment of clarity, he offers an arrow to the slippers that would get me home, the ones I wore the whole trip, the ones I had all along. There was a time in my life when I would only draw this bow-tied conclusion here at the end of a story like this to say I didn't need to go all the way to Hawaii to see what I have in my own backyard. That life and gift and wonder isn't just far away, but it's right here. And I don't have to look later or other, but I can look now and I can look here. And I do think that. I really do.

But this was also a moment of self-acceptance for me, of self-assurance and of decision-making. To trust myself in this moment because of course I was glad I said yes to that trip. I was. But I realized that even if I had said no, I wouldn't have necessarily missed out. Doing the next right thing is just that. It's the next right thing for now, not forever. It's the next right thing as far as we understand what's good and right and next. And if it doesn't turn out as we like or as we hoped, it doesn't mean it still wasn't the next right thing. And if we end up saying no to something and later realize maybe we wish we would've said yes, it still doesn't mean it wasn't our next right thing. It just might mean that our next right thing turned out different than we thought, worse or better, because just life does that sometimes.

And so we keep saying yes where we can and where we want to and where we're led to. And we keep

saying no if we can't, if we sense it isn't right or it's not right right now. And then we just keep doing our next, next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 261 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of paying attention 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 actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman, or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find a transcript of this and every episode. A special thanks to Leah Jarvis who helps us with our show notes, as well as the team at Unmutable who always does such an excellent job editing the sound.

In closing, I'll leave you with a prayer written by Padraig O Tuama, an Irish poet and theologian, and this one's called Prayer in Times of Change.

“God of yesterday, we knew you then: Your promises; your words; your walking among us. But yesterday is gone. And so, today, we are in need of change. Change and change us. Help us see life now, not through yesterday's stories but through today's.” Amen.

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