



265: How to Know What You Want

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 265.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you 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.

Knowing your next right thing is something I hope is a regular rhythm of your life. When you feel stuck, overwhelmed, or unsure, you can always access the next right thing. Sometimes that's simple, obvious, and easy to do. Other times though, we can feel a deeper kind of stuck, the kind that comes from not only not knowing what to do next, but not even knowing what we want to do next, much less how to figure it out. This episode is for you if you struggle to know and name what you want. Listen in.

All right, y'all. Towards the end of this episode, I'm going to ask about 15 questions to help you begin to know and name what it is that you want. I'm telling you now so you can either grab a journal or plan to come back to this episode and listen when you're able to sit and take some notes or at least pause the episode and think for a bit of time. So just know that ahead of time. This could be a good one to write some things down.

I always want to jump right into a conversation like this one with the practicalities. How to know what you want. Here are some ways. Let's do it. But I know this topic is so deeply nuanced, and I realize that many of us have a lot of harmful stories around the question of desire, so it's important to pause. I'm slowing myself down here at the beginning to name various ways that you might be experiencing this question of what do you want.

First, you might be a person who hasn't considered what you want ever. There could be a million reasons for that. You don't even know where to begin. Or you might be a person who knows what you want, but you don't feel allowed to want it. You're afraid to want it, or desire in general is just uncomfortable for you. Or you could be a person who really wants to know what you want, but you're not really sure how to get in touch with that. Or when you do know what you want, you tend to doubt it. Or finally, you could be a person who has always known exactly what you want and you have no idea why we're even having this conversation. You can't even understand why or how some of us don't know.

Well, if you are that last person, perhaps this episode can help you know how to relate to the many people in your life who have a hard time naming or accessing what they really want to do or what they really don't want to do, what they really want to say or not say, where they really want to go or not go. But for the rest of us, I can feel you maybe holding this episode like a hot potato, ready to turn it off at any moment, wondering, "Is it okay to want?" Well, it's a great question. And that conversation, the one

around all of our negative narratives about desire and longing, that is an important conversation to have. It's actually one I've had often. But that's not fully this conversation, because for the most part, I want to talk to the person who wants to know what they want, but they just haven't been able to access it.

If you're holding a decision in front of you and a kind friend is helping you discern what you want to do and they throw out that question to you and they say, "Well, what do you want to do?" And you don't have an answer, you don't have a direction or a clue, well, then this episode is for you.

First up, what do I mean by knowing what you want? I'm going to assume a few things about us, and after doing this podcast for five and a half years, I think I know a little bit about you, for the most part. I'm going to assume what you want is not something that will cause harm to yourself or others, physically or otherwise. I'm going to assume that generally you want something that's not going to be malicious or against the law. I'll assume that you want goodness, that you want connection, that you're turned towards hope.

So having said all of those things, I want to point out that the title of this episode is not how to get what you want. That's a different talk, y'all. That is not my calling to help you know how to get what you want, I'm sorry to say. I'd probably make a lot more money if it was. But it is an important distinction to make, because we usually don't make the distinction. Knowing what you want and getting what you want are two very different processes, experiences, and realities, but we tend to put both of those things into the same pot, knowing and getting. So in general, we tend to be confused about the question. We think, "What do you want?" We think that's a question for kids at Christmas and birthdays, not for grownups on a Tuesday or a Thursday afternoon. We have some re-narrating to do when it comes to this conversation, and I'll say particularly when it comes to faith and desire.

Your desire isn't bad, but when we demand our desires be satisfied on our terms and in our timing, well, that's when we can get into some trouble. But even if you don't get what you want, knowing what you want can still be a great gift.

I've said this often over the years, and I think it bears repeating now. What you want is what you want, whether or not you get it, and whether or not you name it, and whether or not you know it. If something doesn't go your way, plans don't work out, you experience a deep disappointment, the truth is you're going to feel that disappointment regardless. But if you know why you're disappointed, the potential for healing from and being able to move through that disappointment, well, it's much greater.

I can't tell you the number of times I've had to work through layers of grief, anger, frustration, confusion, and fatigue after a life experience, only to realize at the end of it, it was because I had a particular desire and I had not named it. When that desire went unmet, I felt it, but I didn't know why, and so the disappointment came out in other weird ways, like irritability, insecurity, lashing out, silent treatments, overcompensating, shame, fear, or anger. It's remarkable the lengths my subconscious will go to in order to mask my deepest desire.

Our desires are shaping us. And denying our desires, well, that's shaping us too. Remember the words of Dallas Willard, we're always getting a spiritual formation. The question is, what kind?

So why does knowing what you want matter? First, because you are a person. You are not object or robot or machine. You are not a program or an autopilot. You are a human person made in the image of divine God. You have a voice, a presence in the room, a story and a history, a perspective and a point of view that's needed and necessary for the good of all of us. Part of your personhood is the way you move in your body, the feelings you have throughout the day, the type of food you like to eat, the way you spend your time, what you care about, who you love, who you protect, your favorite movie, the color of your eyes, and also your desire. Your desire matters because it's part of who you are, and you matter.

Second, knowing what you want matters because it matters to God. I read the Bible because the Bible is one of the arrows that tells me about the life of Jesus. I believe the way Jesus lived among ordinary people during a particular place, time, culture, and social location is the most universal story I know. And when I read about Jesus, what I read is that he cared about what people wanted. Several times he asked people what they wanted, what wanted him to do for them. He asked a blind man what he wanted. Even if we think that it should have been obvious, he gave that man space to articulate desire without filling in the blanks for him.

Well, third, knowing what you want matters because knowing what you want is foundational in decision-making. It's not the only foundation or the only thing to consider, but it is an important arrow, especially when you have a choice between two good things. That can sometimes feel like the worst. Something can be good, but is it good for you and is it good for now and do you even want it?

Well, how can we know? Well, one thing I know for sure is we have to involve all centers of our intelligence, knowing, feeling, and doing, mind, heart, and body. Guess what? Your mind isn't your only source of information. But I do think it's good maybe for us to start there, with some thinking questions, because that's the place where at least in our Western culture, most of us are conditioned to start and probably where we have the most practice.

How can you know what you want? Well, here's where you might want to grab a notebook or paper or something, and that might come in handy for you. Now, just know there's nothing magical about these questions, but hopefully they can begin the process for you of knowing and naming what you want. So let's maybe pretend if it's not true, maybe it already is true, you don't have to pretend, but if it's not true, let's pretend that you have a particular decision in mind and you don't know what you want to do. So answering these questions that way can help maybe narrow the outcome on the other side. So if you have a decision in mind, we'll enter into this practice together and we'll start with our thinking or with the mind.

First, recall a desire you've had in the past as it relates to this decision. What did you want then?

Two, has anything changed since then? And if so, what?

Three, what's one thing you know for sure today? Just getting in touch with one sure thing could begin to build confidence as you navigate this maddening question of, "What do you want?" There's no wrong answer here. You could make one statement or you could make a whole list, but work the muscle of naming something you know for sure.

When you think about this decision and you consider what you want, what's the worst thing that could happen? What about the best thing?

Moving on to our heart center, here are five questions to consider.

When have you felt most like yourself? What do you miss?

Looking around where you are right now, especially as it relates to this decision, what is the loneliest part?

Where is your confidence growing? What do you wish you wanted?

We've got a few more questions to go, and I hope as you're answering them, you're allowing yourself to answer with your first thoughts. No need to worry about getting it right. This is a practice for you and for you only. No one ever has to know what your answers are.

Finally, we'll move into the body space. When you think about actions that you've taken before, what are some of your favorite yeses?

What were some of your surest nos? And how do you know? Did your body give you any clues?

When you hold this decision in front of you, what do you sense in your body? Is there a swoosh, a dip, a catch, a clinch? Does it rise slightly? Do you hang your head or do you lift it? Do your shoulders tighten or do they drop? Are you open or closed? It might be the slightest shift, almost unnoticeable, but your body has an intelligence.

Finally, recall what you know for sure. That very first question you answered. If you made a list, review it. If you named one thing, bring it to mind. And when you do, notice what happens in your body. Anything? Nothing? Pay attention. Take note.

You just answered at least 15 questions, five for each center of intelligence, designed to bring to mind, heart, and body, the past, the present, and the future. You may not know what you want yet, but perhaps you're beginning to get in touch with who you are, with where you are, and why you are. May you embody the courage to walk along the edge of desire, to sit at the boundary line between knowing and unknowing, to embrace a willingness to ask questions you don't have answers for, and to be open to confess what you want even though you might not get it. May God go with you and may you go with God as you do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 265 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of beginning to name what you want 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 making our lives.

As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find a transcript of this and every episode we've ever done. This could be a good week to print out or at least take a look at the transcript so that you have those questions in your pocket. You can also find me on Instagram, @emilypfreeman.

I want to say thanks to the team at Unmutable for editing our sound, and to Leah Jarvis for organizing our show notes. And thanks to you for listening, for leaving reviews and your kind support.

In closing, a few words from author Ruth Haley Barton, who has been a guest on the podcast in the past. This one's from her book, *Sacred Rhythms*. She writes, "When we pay attention to our longing and allow questions about our longing to strip away the outer layers of self-definition, we are tapping into the deepest dynamic of the spiritual life. The stirring of spiritual desire indicates that God's spirit is already at work within us."

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