



267: How To Handle Interruption

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 267. 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. Today I'll offer some encouragement for when your life feels like one big interruption. Listen in.

Oh, that sacred interrupted life you're living, how can we ever escape them? You know the answer is we never will, but can we make peace with them? I say yes. A partial peace, maybe, an imperfect peace, probably, but sometimes maybe even a settled one. This is more difficult for some of us than others, dealing with interruptions, distractions, and unplanned plans that become urgent, that take precedence over that thing you had scheduled to do instead.

It's one thing to learn the fine art of pivoting our schedules to serve those interruptions when needed to make a change or a turn in order to accommodate what comes up that we didn't expect, and that is a difficult thing to be sure, but I've found it to be more complicated and daunting of a task to disentangle the narratives I have about plans and about interruptions in the first place. As soul minimalists, which is what I sometimes call us here in this space, one of our jobs that we've taken on is to pause, to look beneath the surface, to notice all the ways that we are either confronting or ignoring the interruptions that come our way and how our response to them actually can weigh on us more than we realize. It's forming the way we see ourselves, and sometimes it's doing harm to our image of ourselves and to our image of God.

Specifically for listeners who, like me, grew up in church, which if I remember my numbers right, I think 80% of you who are listening who responded to our survey say you did as well. Many of us were taught two seemingly conflicting narratives. One was that we were to put others before ourselves, which would seem to support the idea that we were to allow interruptions whenever they came because if someone else needs us, that's more important than whatever else we had going on at the moment. The other narrative was that we were to create daily, uninterrupted time for God, called by some traditions as a literal quiet time. Some faith communities would take this further and insist that that be done during a particular time of day, specifically usually in the morning. Now we know that honoring and respecting the needs of others is a way to recognize their inherent dignity. Displaying the virtues of compassion and generosity things we really want to do and showing honor and having respect for God by finding intentional time for prayer is also important and good for us. Of course, we want to spend time with those we love and to make time for those in our community, but I want to submit that we've got our wires crossed as to what this looks like in our actual lives. And I think our stories and directives about how this looks has gone a bit off course because in our experience of these two narratives that play in our head, they often sang a harmony of shame over a lot of us. Put others before yourself and put God before others means that you are failing

more often than not, and also you have no place in the room. I would love to tell a different story, one where you and God and your loved ones and even your not so loved ones are all welcome, are all part of a sacred dance, are all weaving together the story of your life one moment, one silence, one interruption at a time.

When I was in high school, I couldn't wait for my time to be my own in college. In college I imagined graduating and being a real actual grown-up who could make her own schedule. After having tiny children, I thought for sure that I was going to have control of my schedule once they went to preschool, then big kid school, then high school, and now college. You already know where this is going. It doesn't matter your life stage, we will always contend with interruptions. They change and they shift in frequency and in importance, but they're always going to be there. In his book *Domestic Monastery*, Ronald Rolheiser writes about Carlo Carretto, a spiritual writer who spent many years in the Sahara Desert by himself praying. This is what we sometimes imagine as the height of spirituality. One we realize isn't accessible or even desirable for most of us, but still, it's the height. Here's what Rolheiser writes: "Alone with only the blessed sacrament for company milking a goat for his food and translating the Bible into the local Bedouin language. He prayed for long hours by himself, but when he returned to his native Italy one day to visit his mother, he came to that startling realization. His mother, who for more than 30 years had been so busy raising a family that she scarcely had a private minute for herself, was more contemplative than he was. Carretto, though, was careful to draw the right lesson from this. What this taught was not that there was anything wrong with what he had been doing in living as a hermit. The lesson was rather that there was something wonderfully right about what his mother had been doing all these years as she lived the interrupted life amidst the noise and incessant demands of small children. He had been in a monastery, but so had she."

Then Rolheiser goes on to define monastery. "A monastery is not so much a place set apart for monks and nuns as it is a place set apart, period. It is also a place to learn the value of powerlessness and a place to learn that time is not ours but God's." He refers to St. Bernard who writes of the monastic bell that whenever the bell rings in a monastery, the monks are to drop whatever they're doing and respond to the bell to attend to whatever the bell summoned them to do, prayer, meals, work, study, or sleep.

They lived by those bells and the bells called them to task, to sustenance, and to worship, and so this widening definition of a monastery is one I can get fully behind. There is something wonderfully right, not only about the interrupted life of a parent with children, but there's also something wonderfully right about every interrupted life, whether you have children or not, because the reality of our fluid, uneven, unpredictable lives is often our next right thing isn't a decision we make, but a monastic bell that rings inviting a response from us to be called to task, to sustenance, to worship, even though the thing itself feels disruptive. A child needs lunch. A friend asks for your help. The neighbor's dog gets loose and arrives on your doorstep. Your grandmother needs you to pick up her groceries. A client asks for an unplanned meeting. The HVAC guy has arrived to fix the heating unit. Your sister-in-law needs a ride to the doctor. We know all of this is our life, but we often experience them as interruptions to our life. You might remember that famous C.S. Lewis quote, "The great thing if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's own or real life. The truth is of course, that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life, the life God is sending one day by day." So first, and for now, we can ask ourselves what are the monastic bells in my life lately?

Look around and name them. Notice them, and I'll point out the word lately is on purpose because the bells will change over time. But this is only half of our conversation and if we stop here, I think it's still helpful, but I also think some listening will think, "Well, I guess I have to be grateful for all my interruptions now. Can't get any of my work done. I can't have any time for myself. It's one more thing I'm doing wrong." Well that's where another wise quote comes to mind. This one from French composer Claude Debussy who is attributed with this lovely idea, "Music is the space between the notes." There's

meaning depth, richness, in the interval, in the rest, in the silence. The silence is necessary for the notes to be music. Otherwise, it's just a lot of noise. Our pauses, our solitudes, our quiet respite is necessary for our interruptions to be our lives.

So yes, our interruptions are our real life and so are our solitudes and our silences, both the ones we get as a gift and the ones we have to fight for. It's not all one or all the other. You know it's always both. It may be lots of one now and lots of the other later, but over the course of a life, it's always both. It's the silence and the interruptions. It's the way they play together and speak together, and it's the person who we are becoming as we often fight for one and fight with the other. Not all interruptions need our attention and silence and solitude aren't the only path to God. Our time with God is alone and together, it's prayer and meaningful silence and prayer driving to volleyball. Once again, we do not have to wait until everything calms down to live our meaningful lives and we will sometimes have to shut the door and say no to distractions on purpose so that we can attend to our good and beautiful work, to meet a deadline, to rest, to be a person, and remember who we are.

So how can we know when it's time to tend to one over the other? Well, that my friend, is where we are learning discernment. That takes listening to your life, knowing your season, honoring your schedule, paying attention to your people, following arrows to what the moment is asking. Just like our friend Kendra, *The Lazy Genius* talks about living in your season, whether that's having tiny children at home, whether you're a student with a roommate or a single person in your house or you're working 80 hours a week or you have a residency or a student teaching or you're an empty nester or you're taxi driving all the children, whatever it is you're doing, your season has edges and borders. It's not infinite. It will not last forever. Living within it partly means naming it, knowing what it is, and recognizing is not always going to be this way.

Part of living in your season is to recognize the spiritual reality that pulses beneath the surface of your schedule. Where is God in the room of my house? What is God inviting me to today? It might look different than yesterday and tomorrow and it will certainly look different than what God is inviting someone else to, but the invitation, it's always there even if it's not always obvious, and so I'll send you with a blessing, a blessing for your spiritual season, a blessing for those maddening interruptions, blessings to you who is fed up and needs a moment to your actual self, all the blessing to you and to every emotion you feel for being the way that you are, which is just right for now.

Life is an interruption and life is solitude. We need the monastic bells and the pause between the notes. Mostly we need you, lovely embodied you, showing up to your life as it is and not as you wish it to be, able to admit what you need and what you want. You, honest about what you miss and about what you long for. You, celebrating this right now moment. And in all of this you can be sure there is a divine presence, a holy harmony, a welcoming acceptance of the whole colorful mess. So here's to you as you continue to discern your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 267 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of responding to the interruptions when they come and respecting your needed solitudes when you can be just a few more rungs 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 on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](#) and online at [emilypfreeman.com](#) where you can find a transcript of this and every single episode of the podcast. If you want some help with reflection on your life and building that discernment muscle in your day-to-day activities, check out *The Next Right Thing Guided Journal*. You can start at any time at the beginning of any month of the year, and it's a 12-

month walkthrough of your actual life, the one you have right now. And I'll tell you right now, a year from now, two years from now, your life's going to look different, so you might love to have a little bit of help to record what you see and what you're living today. You can find *The Next Right Thing Guided Journal* wherever books are sold. I also have links to it on my website at emilypfreeman.com, so check it out. I hope you enjoy it. I hope it's helpful for you.

In closing, a few more words from Ronald Rolheiser's book *Domestic Monastery*, "Contemplation and action, the monastic and the domestic passion and purity, duty and Self-actualization, this life and the next intellect and will, community and individuality. All of these, like a complete set of keys on a piano are needed if we hope to play all the tunes that the various circumstances of our lives demand one is wise not to cut off part of one's keyboard." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.