



274: On Making Decisions Alone: A Conversation With A Widow

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 274. This is a podcast about making decisions and 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'm glad to welcome one of my dear in real life, local friends to the show. Her name is Anna Kimbrough, and she has a master's in education. She spent most of her life teaching from preschool to high school, both in nonprofit and public school settings. Anna lives here in my town with her family. John and I have been friends with Anna and her husband Tripp for many years, attending small group together and navigating the usual difficulties and joys of parenting kids who were around the same age. Anna and Tripp met when they were both students at Chapel Hill and were married for 23 years until in the Spring of 2020, Tripp died after complications with a biopsy.

Tripp's death was a devastating loss for our little community and personally for our family. But of course, no one feels that loss more acutely than his wife Anna. Now it's three years later, and I'm sitting down with her to talk about the difficulty and heartbreak of making decisions alone after losing your person as well as some of the hope she's received along the way.

As you listen, you'll hear us laugh and also cry, share a few personal stories and a little bit of advice. It's a different kind of episode than usual, but I hope it's a kind comfort, especially for you if you've lost your person. I hope you'll join me in applauding Anna for her courage and deep generosity for inviting us into her story. Listen in.

Emily:

Well, Anna, I'm so glad that you agreed to say yes to be on the podcast today.

Anna:

Thanks for having me.

Emily:

Well, it's my pleasure. Here's something that I can't remember, is when we met.

Anna:
When met, I can't remember that either.

Emily:
Here's what I remember. I remember coming to visit our former church for the very first time and going downstairs where you pick up your kids.

Anna:
Right.

Emily:
I think my kids were still in elementary school.

Anna:
Yes.

Emily:
And you were standing on the other side of like a half door. You know at church?

Anna:
Yes.

Emily:
There's like a Dutch door.

Anna:
Yes.

Emily:
It's like the top opens, but the bottom stays shut.

Anna:
Right.

Emily:
And you were kind of leaning on one of those. And you...

Anna:
Was I a nursery worker?

Emily:
You were work, yeah.

Anna:
Oh.

Emily:
Do you not remember being a nursery worker?

Anna:
No. I blocked those days out.

Emily:
Well, you were. And I feel like we met that way. Like, “Hi, my name is...”

Anna:
Oh.

Emily:
But maybe you kind of had known who I was. Maybe?

Anna:
Yes. We had many mutual friends.

Emily:
Many mutual friends.

Anna:
And I had heard your name. And Tripp, I don’t know if Tripp had known John.

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
Before.

Emily:
I feel like they were in circles.

Anna:
Or we both had just heard your names and.

Emily:
Yes.

Anna:
I don’t know. But I remember hearing that you guys were coming to our church and being very excited about the possibility that you might end up there. We could hang out because I had read your books and you were just one of those people I felt like, “Oh, we could be friends.”

Emily:
We could be friends.

Anna:
I can imagine that.

Emily:
And you were right.

Anna:
Yes. Yes.

Emily:

We could be friends. And John and Tripp were very good friends as well. I wanted to have you on the podcast today because I wanted to talk about the challenge of making decisions alone, specifically when you have been making decisions with another person for a very long time.

And you are the number one person that came to mind for this. And I think this is something that a lot of people struggle with. And the thing is, is it's a struggle because nobody ever tells you how to do it. And by the time you need to do it, you already are supposed to know. It's like there's no lead up, there's no planning.

Anna:

Right.

Emily:

It's not something we learn in school. So you're going to teach us, Anna.

Anna:

Okay.

Emily:

You're going to teach us.

Anna:

I'll try.

Emily:

But as we get started, I would love for you to just share a little bit about your family. Tell us who you are, where you are, all the wonderful things about you.

Anna:

Sure. Well, I was married to my incredible husband, Tripp for 23 years. Sadly, he passed away in April of 2020. Our daughter, Ella, is now 20 and in college. And our son Houston is 15 and he's a freshman in high school. In terms of work, I have worked in the field of education for most of my life, both in public schools and in nonprofits. And I'm currently working as a tutor at a school here in Greensboro.

Emily:

Y'all, Anna is the bravest of brave because she is like, Anna is my real life beloved dear friend, and she's a teacher and she's willing to come here and talk with us about this and her beautiful family. You're just a person, Anna. You get to just, you're just a person. And so thank you so much for being willing to come on here and share with us. So tell us this, how did you and Tripp make decisions during your marriage? I mean, and here, I think sometimes in when we're co making decisions with someone, one of us wears a certain hat.

Anna:

Yes.

Emily:

Or has a certain personality decision making, and then another one has a different one. Was that true for you and Tripp? How did that play out?

Anna:

Tripp was a dreamer, as you remember I'm sure. He used to say that he was like a balloon, and I was the string keeping him grounded.

Emily:
What? Did he really say that?

Anna:
All the time. All the time.

Emily:
Oh my gosh. Of course he did.

Anna:
He would come home from work some days and just say, "I think we should sell everything and move to a Third World country and work and serve there." And I would smile and nod, hand him the baby and say, "Maybe one day. Right now I need to finish making dinner." And that was kind of a picture of the way...

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
That we operated.

Emily:
Yes.

Anna:
Having been diagnosed with a brain tumor in college, we were dating then, he always walked through life in the present. And so he saw each day as a gift and lived each day with a really full heart and a perspective of gratitude. And he did not tend to plan too far in the future. So I was often the one to bring up decisions related to parenting or purchases or our cars or our houses. I, on the other hand, am very pragmatic.

I love research. I love, I always read reviews ad nauseum. In fact, I tend to probably overanalyze in research. And so typically I would come to him with a decision with not only like, "These are the options," but also, "Here's a ton of information for or against or pros and cons." And when I guess gift or curse, depending on how you look at it, is that I easily see both sides of everything. And so even though I had all this information, I still didn't necessarily know what we should do.

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
So wasn't coming with a loaded agenda. I was literally coming saying, "Here's the information, what should we do?" And he was the decider. He had a really strong intuition and a gift of discernment. And he would look at that information, he would pray faithfully, and he would make a sound decision. And I was so grateful.

Emily:
Sure.

Anna:

For someone to close the loop, finish it off.

Emily:
Right.

Anna:
Make a decision.

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
And we would move forward. So that's kind of how it played out in our married life.

Emily:
I don't think I realized this about you guys. What a great fit.

Anna:
Yeah. Yeah. It was.

Emily:
You could do all your research and have all your reasons.

Anna:
Yes. And he was really grateful for that.

Emily:
Sure.

Anna:
Because he didn't have the time nor the interest honestly, in doing all of that. He probably would've made a lot of decisions just by gut.

Emily:
Sure. Yeah.

Anna:
On his own.

Emily:
Were you the, you would take a really long time to research and then you would have one conversation and he would be like, "Okay, this is what we need to do."

Anna:
No, I would bring it up because I was always thinking about things all the time. Surprising.

Emily:
This we know about. This I know about you, my friend, Anna.

Anna:
So no, it was never just one conversation. But I would take my time doing the research and the thinking and praying and the gathering, and then we'd talk about it. And like I said, I mean, he would pray about

it. We would pray about it. And then we'd usually check in again a time or two. And then make it. It also depended on, of course, whatever we were...

Emily:
Sure.

Anna:
Deciding about.

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
But yeah, it was really a gift to have somebody to help me finish making the decision.

Emily:
Absolutely. Well, and you operated that way for a really long time.

Anna:
Yeah.

Emily:
And that became kind of the way you made your grownup adult decisions.

Anna:
Yeah.

Emily:
Now you and I have had countless conversations about the misadventures of being a widow. I mean, we laugh about it because we have to.

Anna:
Yeah. Yeah.

Emily:
You have to laugh about it if you can.

Anna:
You have to.

Emily:
If you are able.

Anna:
Yeah.

Emily:
Because when someone dies, people don't know how to be, they don't like to say the word die. They don't like to say the word dead. They don't know how to be, what to say, what not to say.

Anna:
Right.

Emily:

We could have a whole secret podcast about terrible things people have said. We won't do that here. We won't put you through that. But I would love it if you could just share what have been some of the most generative responses toward you after Tripp died? Things people said that were helpful or supportive or loving in the midst of this process.

Anna:

I think by far, the most helpful thing anyone could do for a widow or for anyone grieving for that matter, is to simply show up and be present. You don't have to know what to say or how to be. We don't either. It's just a gift to show up imperfectly. Being a widow and losing your person is incredibly lonely and an isolating experience.

And so just remembering us at all is a blessing. Sending a note or a text or a phone call or inviting us to things. Even if we say no, we want to be invited. Those things mean a lot to us. I would also say practical help is a big deal. Things you don't even realize that your person did, all of a sudden you're keenly aware.

Emily:

Yeah.

Anna:

Of all the things you did not do around your house. And so when Tripp died, I remember John, your husband John, created a whole calendar of men to come and do our yard work. I didn't even know what needed to be done. Close friends I could call and ask for practical help when a car battery died, or remember when I thought we had mice in our house? Or...

Emily:

Oh, I remember.

Anna:

Or getting something heavy out of the attic. I have friends who come over and walk with me. And I have one friend who always says to me at the end of our walk, "Is there anything you need help with?" And it can be breaking down recycling or helping me move furniture, or, "What do you think of this rug?"

I mean, little things like that that's just a second person to ask, "What do you think about X, Y, Z?" I could go on and on, laundry. I mean, there are lots of things that people have helped me with that you wouldn't even think about. Just things we do throughout the course of a day, in a week, in a month, in a year, in a lifetime.

Emily:

Yeah.

Anna:

My in-laws have helped me move to a new house, and they helped me countless ways throughout the week. My brothers helped me clean out my garage and traveled with me and my kids in the summer. I have out-of-town friends who I talk with over Voxer, which has been a huge gift to just be able to think and share out loud with no interruptions. I think that's the hidden blessing of Voxer.

Emily:

Yes. Absolutely it is. Yes.

Anna:

Is to be able to actually fully process a thought without any interruptions. I would just say while I have the opportunity, if there are any other widows out there listening, just to remember that we're no longer the same person. That we have lost half of who we are and were. And the most apt analogy I've heard is that it feels like an amputation. That part of us is no longer there, and we have to learn how to move through the world differently.

And it's a process and it's a learning process, and we don't know how to do it. And so just again, just to walk alongside, us to simply show up, as I said before, just be gentle with us and let us cry with you and talk about our husbands and your memories of him. Say his name, care about our kids and their wellbeing, and just love us as we try to move forward. Just show up and don't stop showing up.

We just had the three-year anniversary of Tripp's death. And sadly, I can say that I have far fewer friends now than I did three years ago. It's just one of the many secondary losses one experiences after the death of a spouse, but it is really, really painful to lose your closest person of all and simultaneously lose a lot of friends as a result of that.

So I'm really, really grateful to the handful of friends, including you who have stood by me through this and just continue to walk with me through this life and be my friend. I'm sorry I'm crying. And three years out, I mean, as I just said, it's not any easier now.

Emily:
Of course not.

Anna:
It's the same.

Emily:
Yes.

Anna:
He's not here, so.

Emily:
He's still not here. And it's been longer since you've seen him.

Anna:
Yeah. Yeah.

Emily:
And that's something that I think we, you mentioned, "I don't know what I'm doing."

Anna:
Right.

Emily:
We don't know how to do this. And so as much as those who want to comfort a friend who has lost a spouse or a child or a friend or whatever, and we don't know what we're doing, we have to remember the widow doesn't know what she's doing either.

Anna:
Right.

Emily:

Or the person who's lost their person. None of us know what we're doing. And recognizing that and being gentle with ourselves as the co-grievers and remembering gentleness for the one who's grieving can go a really long way. And you never need to apologize for your tears. You know that, Anna. I think it's also worth noting you're a quite young widow. I mean, when you're looking for companionship and people who have been through similar things that you've been through, it's not as easy to find...

Anna:

No.

Emily:

People who have kids in your, you have one still in high school, one in early years of college, and you've made countless decisions, big and small. You moved to a different house, you sent Ella off to school, Houston changed schools, you changed your job. What has been the most helpful support for you in making the big decisions?

Because, and I want to note for the listener that while you say, "I don't know what I'm doing, and I have..." and it's true you, you've never done this before. There's no training for it. They don't teach us this in school. It's just like, "Oh, you've lost your person." And now not only are you grieving the loss, but also there's like the business of death is real hard.

Anna:

It's real, yeah.

Emily:

There's a lot to that.

Anna:

Yeah.

Emily:

And you navigated that a pro if there ever was one. And I know you didn't feel that way, but I've watched you be a person who refuses to do this alone. You are doing it alone. But all the things you just mentioned, the people, the Voxer, the walking with friends, I mean, those things are things you keep saying yes to, even though it's hard.

And I've watched you do that, and you are continuing to show up to your own life, and that's pretty remarkable, honestly, to see. So I'm curious that as you've made decisions. I mean, y'all, Anna will Vox me and be like, "I have three rugs. I'm sending you pictures, which one?"

But I mean, even things like that. So are there resources or certain people you go to for certain decisions? Or I know sometimes I pretend like I'm Tripp for a day. You're like, "I need you to be my husband." But what are some things that have been the most helpful in decision making for you?

Anna:

So I still gather information and do my research.

Emily:

Oh, listen, does she ever.

Anna:

Well, I hold on to the fact that good information leads to good decisions. But Tripp is no longer here

to make the final call. So I do seek out people and information to help educate me when there are big decisions to make. But I have also learned to trust my gut a lot more than I ever have, and to lean heavily on the Holy Spirit for help and guidance. And then there comes a time when I just have to decide.

I think a big change in me now is that I've learned to loosen up quite a bit. I take comfort in the fact that many things we think matter a lot don't actually matter that much in the end. Usually things will be fine either way. And if things don't work out, I also have learned the freedom that I can always change course and do something else if and when I need to. And there's a real freedom in that because it doesn't put all this pressure on making the right decision, which I think I held onto in the past.

Emily:

Well, and you had that safety net of another person's opinion. It's kind of like if I lean hard in one direction and it ends up not being the best or the right, you had someone else to kind of pull you this other way.

Anna:

Right.

Emily:

And now, I mean, we've had a lot of conversations about how it sometimes feels like you're going in a circle.

Anna:

Yeah.

Emily:

Because you don't have another person to kind of...

Anna:

Right.

Emily:

Stop the crazy cycle.

Anna:

Right. It's like a hamster on a wheel. I mean.

Emily:

Sure. And I'm sure it feels that way on the inside. And I think that your, the reminder to yourself that I can always choose different, I can always change course. I mean, there's some things that are final, but I think a lot less things in life are final than we think. Would you say that's true?

Anna:

Yes, for sure.

Emily:

I think that's probably true. Anything else helped you in decision making, Anna?

Anna:

Well, one thing that I just looked back on a couple nights ago that I use, okay, I'm not a journaler, never really have been. I mean, I'm a person who goes to the store and loves to pick out a new one. And then...

Emily:
You're a journal buyer.

Anna:
I'm a journal buyer. I've never been a journal writer. But your Next Right Thing journal, guided journal works for me. I love the format of it and it is so helpful to go back. So a couple nights ago, I looked back over this past year. Because I just buy them when I need a new one, when I run out. I'm not necessarily following any sort of rigid timeline. I just, I'll buy a new one and it'll start with May. It's great, it's fine.

But anyway, I was looking back over it, looking at all of the decisions that I have made over the last year. And it's funny, I also see themes of what is hard for me, what is life draining and what is life giving. And there tend to be trends there and what has helped me make decisions and what has helped move me forward. And you say this a lot, looking back helps you move forward. And that has been a real unexpected gift and blessing to me as I learn how to make decisions on my own.

Emily:
Are there any final words of support or connection that you would offer someone who was maybe recently or newly having to learn to navigate life and make decisions on their own?

Anna:
I think one thing that is really helpful when you have to make a decision and you want some guidance, you feel really alone in it and maybe you don't feel like you have the information or the experience or the expertise to make that decision on your own, find the people in your life who naturally excel or are gifted in that area and ask them for help.

I think as a widow and as widows, we need a lot of help, but we hate feeling needy and we hate feeling like we're always asking for help. But no one will know what we need unless we ask. So I would encourage people to really ask. Or if you have a good friend or anyone in your life who's willing to serve as an advocate for you, who could ask others or ask around at church or whatever, to find somebody in that area who might help you.

I think also talking to friends and family members who know you really well, who can just listen to you talk. Because sometimes you're saying the answer as you're talking to them. I know you've done that for me before. "Well, what you just said was..."

Emily:
Yeah.

Anna:
But those who can listen well as you think out loud and ask you good questions. I think you and my therapist, who's also named Emily as well as my brother have been those people for me who have really just kind of reflected back what I have been saying so that you let me hear myself. Because we don't always hear ourselves. I pray a lot. I ask God to help me often. Just crying out the word help is probably my most frequent prayer.

And I think our minds and our souls and our bodies are all connected, and we can usually trust ourselves. If we spend the time to listen and spend time with ourselves, sometimes we can hear what we already innately know. I think that's one of the gifts of widowhood is like it or not, I'm alone a lot of the time and I'm settling into the fact that I enjoy spending time with me. A friend once told me that her therapist encouraged her to often check in with herself and ask the questions, what do I think? What do I feel? What do I want? What do I need? And the answers to these questions often reveal to me what my next right thing might be.

Emily:

Well, speaking of your next right thing, we would love to hear, Anna, what is your next right thing?

Anna:

Well, this afternoon I am going to go home and work on a trip that I'm taking with my son this summer to California to go see my daughter who'll be working out there. And it will require a lot of decision making.

Emily:

Yes, it will.

Anna:

I will be deciding where to go and where to stay and what we're going to do. And I will work on it for as long as I can, and then I will happily take a break from making all of those decisions and make something really brainless for dinner.

Emily:

Well, Anna, thank you for being here on The Next Right Thing.

Anna:

Oh, thanks for having me.

Emily:

I'll tell you that we've walked this road together. I sometimes close up sometimes from a distance, but we... by the way, this is the Anna y'all that I talk about on my, What's Saving My Friendship Life. Anna and I have a monthly coffee date. I'd love to do it more often, and then sometimes we have to skip a month because there's traveling and things evolved. But it saves my life to know that I'm going to see Anna and we can connect in that way and talk about, sometimes we laugh the whole time, sometimes we cry the whole time.

Anna:

Usually we do both.

Emily:

And usually we do both. It just depends on the day. But I'll say that this year, that you just mentioned it's been three years since Tripp died. And I think this year I've been noticing you talking about the future more than the past three years. And there's no timetable for when talking about the future is something you do more naturally. I think that that whole time heals things, no time heals nothing. But for you, I've just noticed you looking forward maybe more than this time last year. And it's fun to talk about.

Anna:

Yeah.

Emily:

Like this trip you're going to take and kind of what might be coming next. So I love hearing that your next right thing involves both a really fun trip and a really simple dinner.

Anna:

Yes. The perfect day.

Emily:

The perfect day. Thank you, Anna.

Anna:
Thank you.

Emily:
I love you so.

Anna:
Love you too.

Thanks for listening to episode 274 of The Next Right Thing. I hope the simple practice of bearing witness to grief and doing just one next right thing in the midst of it will be 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, it's also about making life.

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 other episode. Anna is in her words, just a normal person whose husband died and is trying to figure out how to live without him. She has no website, no public email address. But if you're someone learning to navigate the world without your person and would like to connect with Anna, feel free to reach out to us at info@emilypfreeman.com and we'll do our best to connect you together. A special thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits our sound and to Ashley Sherlock, who's keeping me organized and creative in all my Next Right Things, including our podcast tech and show notes.

In closing, here's a short excerpt from the book, *It's OK That You're Not OK* by Megan Devine, "What has happened cannot be made right. What is lost cannot be restored. There is not beauty here inside this central fact. Acknowledgement is everything. You're in pain. It can't be made better. The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of. You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life. Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.