



288: This Could Be Why You Feel Exhausted

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 288. This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's 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's questions: why do I feel so exhausted? How can I remain a soul minimalist while having a maxed-out schedule? Does our soul have rules? And if so, what the heck are they, and how can knowing them help us in our next right thing? This is not a conversation about pitting your schedule against your soul, but it is to elevate our awareness that trying to tackle soul things with a scheduler's mindset will almost always lead to frustration, disappointment, and exhaustion. Listen in.

The soul and the schedule don't follow the same rules. I've said this for years, and people tend to understand intuitively what I mean by it. But it seems worth an episode to define our terms and flush out a little bit more for us what that means in our daily lives, specifically because an unawareness of this principle impacts our ability to make clear decisions, specifically when it comes to feelings of burnout and exhaustion. Our physical exhaustion could be evidence of a million things, a too-full schedule, a lack of sleep, high stress, stage of life, you know, the whole list. But we all know it's possible to feel physically exhausted and not have anything external to point to. That could be a sign that you're tired on the inside, and that's where the rules are different.

One sneaky cause of burnout could be because you're still figuring out what it means that the soul and the schedule don't follow the same rules. Well, in our few minutes together, I want to do my best to define what are the rules of the schedule and what are the rules of the soul and how can we tend to both. Now, when I say rules, I hesitate even to use that word. It is not scientific. Hopefully, you know that. This is not an official declaration of the rules of anything really, but these are general principles that we all know but maybe have never really thought much about. That's my specialty, is I take things that we all know and make whole episodes about them.

Well, I'll share these rules using five main categories, comparing and contrasting how we approach our schedule and how we might be invited to tend to our soul. First category is productivity. What does it mean to be productive? Specifically, what is our scheduler mindset posture toward productivity, and what is our soul's posture toward productivity? When we are in a scheduler mindset, our posture toward productivity is a friendly one. We look forward and create a list of things to do in order to accomplish future goals. We're creating priorities to act on, and productivity is obvious and measurable.

Now, it's not that our souls do unproductive work, but the signs of productivity at the soul level will look and feel different on the inside than we're used to measuring on the outside. It may often feel like nothing is happening in your inner life. It may feel idle, quiet, or too still. But just because nothing is happening doesn't mean nothing is happening. The concept of dormancy comes to mind. With our schedule, if things aren't checked off the list, it means we haven't done them. Maybe we're late or behind. Maybe an unchecked list leads to feelings of frustration or panic. Not necessarily so with a soul. Here, the rules are different. Dormancy is when physical functions are slowed for a period of time as if you're in a deep sleep. A state of rest or inactivity is what's happening on the level of your soul when maybe it feels like nothing is happening. The lack of action here could be the very thing that signifies growth.

What could be helpful when you're exhausted on the inside is instead of looking ahead and making a list of priorities to act on to try to get things to happen, it's instead to look back and reflect on actions that you want to continue to prioritize in the future. Instead of listing actions to be checked off like we do with our schedules, on the level of our soul, we pay attention to energy that needs to be held. It's a small shift, but it could have a big impact. You've heard me talk, maybe, for years about the life energy list, about listing what's life giving and what's life draining, and that's where this might come into play.

Productivity, if you want to call it that, at the soul level is not measured by getting things done as it is with our schedule. Soul productivity is tending to and paying attention to is life-giving and what is life-draining in our lives, and then elevating our level of intentionality as we move forward as much as possible to engage in moral life-giving actions in the future. It won't be measurable or efficient, but it will be hopefully full of life.

Here's our second category. What are the rules of the soul and the schedule when we encounter a problem? When we have a scheduling problem, our instinct is to solve it, and this is a good instinct. Shift things around, have conversations, get clarity, and pivot until things work. But when we encounter problems in our inner life, grief, disappointment, apathy, an experience of distance from God, our instinct to solve could be the thing that causes even more inner angst. This we know, but it doesn't make it easy to accept. So what should we do? Rather than working to solve, here is where we might respond to an invitation to sit with in the form of clearing some space and naming the unnamed things. It might feel deeply unproductive, but here is where deep mysterious work can happen, where

now that you've named the thing and gotten it out into the open, perhaps it's out there enough for the light of the love of God to surround you. Not that God's love isn't already there, but simply that sitting instead of solving can often be the thing that allows us to become aware of the love that already surrounds us. Problems encountered in our schedules and our soul do have something in common though. Both require creativity, flexibility, and loads of patience.

Our third category is questions. Similar to how we approach scheduling problems, we deal with our scheduling questions in the same way: we solve problems and we look for answers to our questions. But the questions our souls carry aren't so easily dismissed. Rather than solving problems and looking for answers, our souls need us to sit with our problems and look for arrows. Not necessarily an arrow to a solution, but an arrow to what needs tending. The words of Jesus come to mind from Matthew 11 as paraphrased in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." These words are an arrow for the soul, not a solution, but a solve.

Fourth category is success. How we measure success for our schedules is fairly straightforward. Is it organized? Have we prioritized? Is it clear? Is the to-do list checked off? There are a million other ways we might measure success, but those are just four quick questions we might be asking ourselves. We all know that trying to apply organization, prioritization, clarity, and completion to our soul does not work, but we still try to do it anyway. Let's say I'm feeling sad, angry, hurt, disappointed, and I try to organize those feelings, maybe thinking, "Well, I shouldn't be feeling these ways because other people have it worse. I'll just declutter this feeling and organize it out of the way and try to get rid of it." Or maybe we try to prioritize what we think should be most important, "Well, I don't have time to deal with this right now because this feeling I'm having is not the most important thing. The most important thing is for me to meet this deadline."

Or maybe we try to analyze it to bring clarity, "Well, I'm feeling this way, but I don't understand why. I really shouldn't be feeling this way. I'm feeling this way because I don't know, and it doesn't make any sense." We're trying to find clarity in that feeling. Or maybe we try to put a deadline on it to check it off, "Yeah, I feel this way, but I felt this way for a little bit too long. Time's up, and I need to just get over it." Success for our schedule looks like completion, a straight line with a clear beginning, middle, and end, at least that's the idea, that's the concept. But success in our soul, if we dare even call it that, and I never would except for the sake of this conversation, it looks more like becoming, a circle we travel around and around again, revisiting who we were, who we are, and who we will become. We're not trying to finish a feeling, we are invited to feel our feelings. Every now and then we might experience some level of organization, clarity, or completion at the soul level in some way, but that's the exception and never the rule.

And finally, time. One final distinction between the rules of the schedule and of the soul can be found in the difference between their orientation to time. When we're in a scheduling mindset, our thinking about the future is to work toward predictable outcomes. We're setting goals, making plans, marking dates, systemizing things as best we can. Our relationship to the present is efficiency in the moment. And our relationship to the past might be more passive, but maybe we're willing to learn from it so that we can avoid common mistakes that maybe we've made before.

When it comes to the soul, our posture toward the future might be one of uncertainty. Rather than working toward predictable outcomes, our work instead is to make present peace with a future uncertainty. Our relationship to the present instead of efficiency is simply an invitation to exist, to be here now. And our relationship to the past, similar to a scheduler mindset, might be in reflection we learn from it. We take what we've done before and elevate what was life-giving and maybe try to avoid what was life-draining to the best of our ability.

Well, by way of review and thinking about these rules, rules of the schedule, rules of the soul, when it comes to productivity, the rules of the schedule offer to-do list and invite us to look forward and list priorities to act on. But the rules of the soul invite us to create life energy lists, to look backward and list actions to prioritize. When it comes to problems, the rules of the schedule are to solve them, but the rules of the soul are to sit with them. When it comes to questions, the schedule says, "Look for answers," and the soul invites us to look for arrows. What about success? The rules of the schedule say success means completion, and it might look like straight lines. But the rules of the soul are different. Success looks like becoming, and it resembles more of a circle.

And finally, when it comes to our orientation to time, when we're in our scheduler mindset, we're working toward predictable outcomes for the future. But on the level of the soul, we work to make present peace with the future uncertainty. Our priority in the present when it comes to our schedules is efficiency, but with the soul, it's simply existence, be here now. And then, finally, our orientation to the past, both when we think of our schedules and our souls is to learn from it. Mostly, you can systemize your schedule, but you can't systemize your soul. And one sneaky cause of burnout could be because we act like our inner and outer life play by the same rules. To live in the world will always involve some degree of assessment, vision, planning, strategy, execution, completion, and evaluation. It's the way of our modern life.

But if we approach ourselves this way, we'll end up feeling some degree of shame, fear, or anger, and yes, exhaustion. And so when we are faced with a decision or in a season of discernment, it's good to be aware that we need both of these mindsets. We may need the straight lines of reason, but not to the exclusion of the curved shape of the soul. We aren't robots spitting out perfect next right moves. We're humans discerning, growing, responding, and living nuanced, messy, stunning lives. The soul and the schedule don't follow the same

rules, but both our schedules and our souls need stewarding and tending patience and grace, and both are part of being a whole person. May you continue to learn the unforced rhythms of grace as you do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 288 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of learning the rules of the soul 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 making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram, @emilypfreeman, or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can find a transcript of this and every episode.

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In closing, I'll share a prayer from my fourth book, *Simply Tuesday*, that released eight years ago this month, and it's all about small moment living in a fast moving world. "A prayer for those sitting in the fog. We confess our love of cloudless days, bright mornings, clearly marked pathways. We confess our discomfort in the fog, but recognize a longing we discover there too. Even as we confess our desire for answers, maybe learn to walk humbly with questions. Help us to find your company beside us as we crouch in the darkness and wait for the first light of dawn. Help us to know your presence in ways we may have otherwise overlooked, if not for our inability to see." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.