



291: The Next Right Thing for Perfectionists

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 291. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family. And through my work, I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue. So that they can discern their next right thing in faith, work, and life. You are enjoying this podcast ad free because of the generous support of subscribers to the Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more and subscribe at emilypfreeman.substack.com, where we'll continue the conversation about discernment and decision-making, for anyone who wants to move beyond the pro con list.

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 question, when is good enough great? We'll talk about when perfectionism keeps us stuck. I hope you'll listen in.

As it is with anything, it's important to define our terms. And so for our purposes today, what I mean by perfectionism is simply that in some area of life, you have a version of an expectation, maybe an unrealistic one for how something should be, and it's not matching up with your reality. This is a gross, simplified definition, and I could probably make all the arguments for why it's not complete or enough, but guess what? We're not going to be perfect about it and we only have a few minutes together. So I trust that when you saw the title and you clicked, play here, you have your own definition, your own version of perfectionism that you through self-awareness, reflection, or general knowledge of being a person, you realized that it has a hold on you somehow. Maybe it's holding you back from moving forward, making progress, or finally making a move.

The truth is, you could be stuck in perfectionism but you don't even realize it. So here are five different mindsets of perfectionism that could be keeping you from making a decision, as well as five imitations to move forward into your next right thing. First up, all or nothing thinking. This is a mindset that most of us recognize when someone around us is engaged in it, but maybe it's harder to recognize a name in ourselves. An example of all or nothing

thinking is delaying a project because you're aware of its limitations. And so instead of doing something, you would rather do nothing. Even if something would actually be quite good.

All or nothing thinking does not tend to be the perfectionistic mindset that trips me up as much as some of the other ones that I'll talk about in a minute. But I have noticed this in myself, especially recently as it relates to my house. For example, you may have been around when I shared the work I did in my sunroom, turning it into a home office. I wrote a blog post all about it, I have lots of before and afters with links. We'll put it in the notes. But I was aware through the entire process of redoing that room, that I was fighting a resistance the whole time. Moving through it, knowing that we couldn't do everything I wanted to do in the timeframe that I wanted to do it.

For example, there's a sink in my sunroom. I know, you probably haven't seen it in the pictures because I don't take pictures of it. I don't know what to do with the sink. It's kind of an eyesore. You'll rarely see it, like I said, in the pictures because I don't photograph from that angle. But it's there and we got a quote to do something cool with it. I wanted to make a coffee bar type thing and have a little fridge in there and coffee and the whole thing. But because of air vents and house structure and reasons, we couldn't do what I wanted to do. And so I had to keep moving forward in the room with my office redo, even though the sink is still there. And it's not changed, it's exactly as it's been since basically we moved in. So for now, we're using that sink as a plant watering home base. And though I do not love how it looks, it's a fine partial solution. While this time, all or nothing thinking did not win out. I was still aware of the temptation to not move forward at all in the room because of this one part that couldn't be what I wanted it to be.

I think of other areas that aren't necessarily projects, but bring out that all or nothing mindset. For example, a personal retreat that I only had 24 hours for rather than the planned 48 hours. It wasn't ideal, I really wished it could have been longer. But it really was better than nothing. Another area is in cooking. We've talked about the kitchen recently here on the Next Right Thing. My sister's the queen of the partially home cooked meal. She talks about maybe making one thing from scratch, making one thing really special, like the main dish. But then use the bagged salad or the pre-made sides or slice and baked cookies. Combine the things, it doesn't have to be all homemade or nothing at all. Partial solutions can be our kindest friend when we're stuck in an all or nothing mindset. A resource that could be helpful for you, hopefully you already know about it, is the Next Right Thing book. Where I offer simple soulful practices for making all kinds of life decisions.

A second perfectionistic mindset that I struggle with more than all or nothing is having a critical mindset. Now, maybe you wouldn't call this perfectionism, but I can tell you it's what it feels like on the inside. A self-critical or a critical mindset is one where you embody a relentlessly ungracious posture toward yourself or others. It's one that keeps record. It stands on tiptoe but can never reach the mark. It points the finger at every turn. This mindset may not keep you from action initially. But it sure makes the process miserable and

it might keep you from ever finishing. Or if you do finish, you may never be satisfied with the results.

If this type of perfectionism is the one that shows up the most for you, pay attention to when that critical voice rises up in you if you're able to differentiate it from your regular voice. And then ask yourself this question, what would it be like to offer self-compassion right now instead of self contempt? And then when you ask that question, pay attention to your own response. Do you feel like rolling your eyes? Do you tear up? Does it make you feel exhausted? This may not be a solution, but it could be one next right thing.

A good resource for you if you're struggling through the critical mindset of perfectionism is episode 325 of the Lazy Genius Podcast with Kendra Adachi. That episode's called Dealing with Differences on How Something is Done. And while it's not specifically talking about having a critical mindset, if you're someone who's aware of that critical tendency in general, this episode could be a kind companion to accompany you along the way.

A third perfectionistic mindset is one of comparison. This is when we hesitate moving forward because we see how other people or how another person has done it, set it, built it, created it or written it. And we don't feel like we measure up. And so instead of moving forward with potential for the results to be less than what we've seen someone else do, we figure what's the use? Comparison can be a debilitating roadblock for a lot of reasons, but a big one is that it doesn't only implicate things outside of us. Like hindering our output on a project or a task or a decision. But it threatens our inner life, our self-image, our confidence, and ultimately our belief that we are valued, worthy, and beloved.

When you're stuck in the vortex of comparison thinking, there are some simple practices that could pave the way to safety, like noticing and naming, what is true right now? Have you recently started a new job or a new role and you're feeling particularly new in it? Have you had an injury or sickness that's changed your energy level in some way? Has someone criticized you or has criticized someone you love and is that causing you to feel a particular sting of insecurity? Do you have a child who's struggling with a particular anxiety, sickness or heartbreak? Are you waiting for results that are out of your control? All of these circumstances and so many others, if they're true for you, can cause us to get stuck in comparing what's happening in our own life to what we assume is happening in someone else's. And that can keep us stuck from moving forward with hope.

If you feel stuck in this perfectionistic mindset, one helpful resource for you could be a book written by my friend and a spiritual formation mentor of mine, Richella Parham. It's called *Mythical Me: Finding Freedom from Constant Comparison*.

A fourth perfectionistic mindset is thinking A plus only work is allowed. Perhaps this might be what we think of when we hear the word perfectionism in general. Straight A's and everything, and that just doesn't have to apply only in school. Back in 2018, remember those

innocent days of 2018? Anyway, I was listening to the Marketing Made Easy podcast with Amy Porterfield, where she interviewed life coach Brooke Castillo. In that episode, which by the way was called, Why You Aren't Taking Action, Brooke pointed out that one of our obstacles for taking action is giving ourselves way too much time to get something done. And so in her conversation with Amy, they talked about replacing the phrase, for example, instead of saying, "I'll finish this task by Wednesday." Instead say, "I'll finish this task in one hour." It doesn't have to be an hour right now, but when it's time to do the task, tell yourself, "I have an hour to do it, and that's it."

She mentions that you have to be realistic about the timeframe you give to something, but she points out that you have to have one. Now, of course, that can be difficult if you tend toward perfectionism because it can take a long time to get a thing right. And then Brooke says a sentence in their conversation that I haven't yet forgotten five years later. She said, "B minus work can still change lives." That one line in 2018 was so helpful for me because it named that I'm kind of afraid of B minus work, but also because I knew she was right. I've benefited from plenty of work that wasn't A plus, but was still deeply helpful in my life. I've produced plenty of B minus work and less, C minus work, that I know has helped people in their lives.

This one is similar to the all or nothing mindset, like it's either an A plus or it's a failure. But the reality is many things are solidly good, great even. And excellence can still be embodied in B minus work even if perfection is far off. And so I've already mentioned the resource that can be helpful if this is the mindset that you get stuck in, and that is that episode with Amy and Brooke that I mentioned. It's episode 218 of Marketing Made Easy called Why You Aren't Taking Action.

Well, a final perfectionistic mindset that could be keeping us from our Next Right Thing, it's defensiveness. Oh, it's the worst one of all. Defending yourself can become a full-time job, one that takes up brain space at work, in your car, on the weekends, at the grocery store, and in every conversation with yourself and with others. You may have encountered someone who has offended you and then you spend a lot of your time defending yourself to this ungracious person. Not to their face, but maybe behind their back, to anyone who will listen. I only know this because I've done it. It's a skill we all come by quite naturally. It's our remarkable ability to take offense. We're offended when we're hurt, we're offended when we're misunderstood, we're offended when people don't acknowledge our feelings. Being constantly defensive could be a form of perfectionism, wanting to be sure you're perfectly understood, that you have made your point, that people either know you didn't mean to do a thing or that you definitely did mean to do a thing and also why.

Of course, I'm not saying that it's bad to be offended always or that we should never defend ourselves. I hope you know by now, I don't speak in absolutes like that. There's always nuance and discernment involved in these things. And we of course need to leave room for offenses that are worth fighting for in the face of injustice, discrimination, prejudice,

racism of any kind, outrage and offense. These are the appropriate responses. But when it comes to one-to-one relationships, work relationships, friendships, family, when someone who knows and loves us is offering some honest feedback, even if that feedback is offered imperfectly. What if we took a beat and considered it? It might mean we have to confront something that we don't like about ourselves. It might mean that we have to have a tough conversation with someone where we're both having to be honest with each other.

And so while there are a million good reasons to be offended and defensive, I guess I'm asking here this question. Is your defensive response taking energy away from forward movement? Is your compulsion to explain yourself and be understood keeping you from your next deeply right thing? Perhaps a good resource for all of these mindsets could be Brene Brown's work, the Gifts of Imperfection. All about how to let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are.

I wonder which perfectionistic mindset trips you up the most. If you're unsure, take a few minutes to think about all the various projects you've thought of or you've started and then stopped, and ask yourself, what is the primary obstacle to forward progress or completion? Can I consider a partial solution? Can I offer self-compassion? Can I be honest about what is true now that could be tempting me to compare my life circumstance with someone else's? Am I willing to do B minus work? Is there an area in my life where I can begin to welcome feedback rather than try to protect myself against it? Here's to an increasing gentle awareness of our own perfectionistic tendencies and to a growing kindness toward all of ourselves no matter where we are in the midst of our own discovery of them. And as always, here's to doing your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 291 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of recognizing perfectionism 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 on Instagram @EmilyPFreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com where you can find a transcript of this and every episode. A big thanks to Ashley who does our tech and show notes, and to the team at Unmutable who edits our sound. I'm grateful for all the humans who help make this podcast possible, including you, dear listener. If you like what you hear, I hope you'll consider not just continuing to listen, but to hit the subscribe or follow button wherever you listen to podcasts. And even better, leave a review as it helps more people find us here.

Well, in closing, a few words from the late Dr. Larry Crabb, a mentor, author, and a teacher of mine who I miss and who said this phrase I think of often and seems fitting for us as we consider all the ways we might be trying to do and be just right. He said, "God meets us where we are, not where we pretend to be." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.