



299: The Problem with Binaries in Decision-Making

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 299. 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, in work and in life.

You're enjoying this podcast ad free because of the generous support of the 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 list.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, with chronic hesitation, or if you are someone who just needs a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, while you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Next week we are celebrating a milestone episode, so stay tuned at the end because we want to hear from you. Today's question, how can we know the difference between a yes, an absolutely yes, a maybe, a probably not, and a no. And what do we do with the simple one line advice that doesn't always seem to apply? Listen in.

So when you have a podcast about decision-making and discernment, then anytime you see things about that topic, you stop and make note, or maybe this is a case of the chicken and the egg. The reason I have a podcast about decision making and discernment is because I would always stop and take note about the topic, and of course that led me to wanting to have a place to put those notes and to talk about them. Well, either way, here we are and I continue to collect, curate, and create ideas, images, and concepts to consider in order to help us become better informed decision makers, but also to help us continue to become more fully ourselves through the whole process.

Well, I love when I hear great advice, especially when it's given in short, memorable form. Over the years, I've both heard and offered a lot of advice and perspective this way, like for example, some memorable statements. At least they're memorable to me. Maybe they are to

you too, some that I've made and continue to make on this topic. Just because you're good at something doesn't mean you have to do it forever. Pick what you like then see how it grows. Stop collecting gurus.

Now, of course, collecting gurus is different from choosing our teachers with intention and some teachers I've chosen to learn from have also said some short memorable statements on decision-making that have helped me over the years. For example, my dad, Gary Moreland, told me a long time ago, back when I was in college, 51-49 is still a decision. Marie Forleo says "Clarity cannot be rushed." One of my teachers, Dr. Larry Krab said this, "God meets us where we are, not where we pretend to be." Ann Lamott, "No is a complete sentence." And of course the advice this podcast is named after that comes from the likes of Brennan Manning, Martin Luther King Jr. Mother Theresa, the Big Book of AA, and don't forget Anna from Frozen. When you don't know what to do, just do the next right thing.

These short lines of advice are helpful and ring true, which is why we repeat them, and write them down, and try to apply them to our particular situations. But then there are the other one-liners that may sometimes give us pause. One of those for me is this one, "If it isn't a hell yes, it's a no." Maybe you've heard that one before. Again, that's, "If it isn't a hell yes, it's a no." Quick caveat, I'm going to go ahead and use the actual word hell because that is the quote, and because saying heck yes, does not have the same impact, and all caps "yes" is clunky, and just plain yes is what we're actually trying to differentiate between regular yes, so from now on hell yes it is. That's just what we're going to talk about today.

Well, I first heard a version of this advice from Greg McKeown's bestselling book, *Essentialism*, which I love. Now, Greg changed it to slightly, he changed the wording to, "If it isn't a clear yes, then it's a clear no." He introduces this concept in a chapter of the book called "Select the Power of Extreme Criteria". Here, McKeown references the person who's credited with first coming up with this short decision-making binary, TED speaker, American entrepreneur and author Derek Sivers who wrote a book called "Hell Yeah or No. What's Worth Doing?" I haven't read the book.

Full disclosure, I have read about the book and I've learned that this statement came from a time when Derek was invited to go on a faraway trip, I think maybe for business, but when it came time for the trip, he realized it was interfering with something that he wanted more, and he realized that at the time he said yes to that trip. It just sort of sounded like a cool idea, so he said yes to it, but a friend said something to him. "It sounds like you're at a point in your life where if it's not a hell yes, it's a no."

Well, that statement became a decision-making rubric for Derek, one I've seen repeated by mostly white male entrepreneurs over the years. He advises people to use this phrase, if you're over committed or too scattered, "There is no yes," he says, "There is only hell yeah or no."

McKeown points out that the key to this phrase is to quote, "put the decision to an extreme test." If we feel total and utter conviction to do something, then we say, yes, Derek style. Anything less than that gets a thumbs down. Now, McEwen adds in the reality that if our decision-making categories are too broad, we might find ourselves saying yes to too many things, over-committing ourselves to options that are just so-so, or kind of cool, things that may prevent us from saying yes to the things we would absolutely love to do, what he calls our highest contribution.

I actually like a lot about this advice, maybe not for every single area of life, but at least for those areas where we might be presented with pretty cool opportunities. In fact, I have a whole episode where I offer 20 questions to ask before you say yes to a great opportunity. That's episode 219. But I also think as with everything, there's always nuance to consider and no one line of advice always applies.

A little more about Derek Sivers, the guy who popularized, "If it isn't a Hell, yeah, it's a no." According to his author bio on Amazon, he's known for his surprising quotable insights and pithy succinct writing style. He's the guy who started CD Baby. He's been a musician, programmer, TED speaker and circus clown. That's for real. He was a circus clown for many years. He sold his first company for \$22 million and gave all the money to charity.

He's a minimalist. He's living with one pair of pants and two plates. He keeps exactly enough money to live and has designed his life to be one of learning and of making stuff. He imagines his time is worth actual money and in many ways I guess we could say all our time is worth money, but he says if an hour of his time is worth a thousand dollars, then it would cost him \$70,000 to watch Game of Thrones, something he would never do.

He doesn't use social media, no Netflix, no hanging around chitchatting. He says he can't even relate to people who party or watch TV. He has a son he loves but doesn't want his son to feel any obligation to him. He describes his extended family as "fine" saying, "I don't hate them, but I don't love them." He doesn't like live music, doesn't trust the internet. He hates to waste time. He's always lived the life of a workaholic. He says, from 7:00 AM to midnight, seven days a week for 10 years, he focused on just simply being a great musician.

If you listen to him on a podcast interview, which I have done, and he says yes to podcast interviews sometimes, he has a friendly voice and says he loves to meet new people. He likes ideas and deep thought. He loves time alone. Now, he lives in New Zealand and loves to travel, but says, "I realize that expensive hotels give me almost no joy, so for future travels, I'll rent a cheap room in someone's house. Then donate the difference in price to someone there who needs it." He says he cares deeply about very little. He's committed to just a few people and a few interests. Everything else he keeps away. He says, it's a simple and sincere life.

Well, that's his philosophy of life, as in he literally doesn't seem to do anything he doesn't

want to do. Why did I just give you a mini biography of Derek Sivers? Well, because when someone gives a binary for anything, I think it's good to know where they're coming from, so if it's not a hell, yeah, it's a no. Well, now that has some context. The reality for most of us is this. Sometimes we just have to choose partial solutions and almost theirs. Sometimes our next right thing is to say yes to something that we don't want to do because we are grownups and part of a family or a community and we decided those things matter, and so we do them. Sometimes our initial instinct is hell yeah, only to upon reflection realize it felt like a yes because it was cool, or I was glad to be invited, but in fact it's more like a cool, but maybe not for me right now kind of thing.

Sometimes our initial instinct is absolutely not because of fear or insecurity or time or lack of something, but upon reflection we realize that we do in fact really, really want to make this thing work, and that becomes a clear yes in time. We all won't be able to or even do we want to live Derek Siver's life and not all decisions can move smoothly through the hell yeah or no rubric, but that doesn't mean his advice is unhelpful for our lives. And in situations where we find ourselves over-committed, it could definitely be a helpful filter through which to look. The gift of that statement for me is that it forces me to discern the why behind my yes and whether or not in those things where we have a choice, am I saying yes, but I'm just fooling myself that it's something I really want to do, or am I doing the thing to please someone else or to meet an expectation that's unnecessary?

Am I saying yes to keep the peace that rubric? If it's not a hell yes, it's a no, can help us discern when some of those things might be off kilter. One good way to know what a hell yes feels like. Look back. You already knew this was coming. If you want to discern if your yes is a yes or an absolutely yes first, look back before moving forward. Make a list, check it twice. One, name your past hell yeses. Both the things you knew were a hell yes at the time and things that you now realize were hell yeses even though they didn't feel like it. When was a time when you said yes to something and it was the best?

Two, when was a time you said yes to something and it was not great at all? Remember the types of choices we're talking about? Not necessarily obligations that might come with just being a grown person, but those things where you do have a choice. For me, that might be things like work or speaking engagements or trips or travel, things like that.

Three, when was a time when you said no to something and you wished you would've said yes? And four, when was a time when you said no and you were so glad you did. And so looking back can help you know and name those times when your clear yes was a clear yes or when you may be wished you have said a clear yes. But also what is your instant physical response to potentially saying yes to a particular decision? When you get quiet, when you put one hand on your heart and the other on your belly, when you close your eyes, do any colors, pictures, images or ideas come to mind? What are they? How might you describe them?

I can't say what a hell yes will feel like for you. Only you can do that. I can say though what it's felt like for me. Sometimes it's happy doing something for my kids that I know they'll love or getting the opportunity to travel somewhere I've always wanted to go. Sometimes it looks grounding and sure, but not happy at all. When I've had to walk out of beloved rooms, I thought I'd stay in forever. It was still a clear yes, even though it broke my heart. Sometimes it feels like clarity, like sharp, fresh air on a deep autumn night like a full moon, like the straight line of blue on blue while standing on the edge of the sea and you just know a thing deep down, like you've always known it.

Sometimes it feels like prayer, like having an actual face-to-face, conversation with divine God, the one who is wild about you, not the one who shakes a finger in your general direction. Sometimes a clear yes sounds like you being as honest as you're able stating what you really want again or for the first time, there's a lot to learn in discovering for you what is the difference between your, yes, I could do this and your hell yes, I must do this. For some of us it will be instant, but that's not always how it happens and it's okay if your hell yes comes from a slow burn as you continue to do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 299 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this conversation about discerning your Yes from your hell yes 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 deeper truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman and online at emilypfreeman.com where you can find a transcript of this and every episode and a special thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound, and to Ashley who does our show notes. And thanks to you for listening for leaving reviews on Apple podcasts so others can find us here, and for your kind support through email and DMs. It's always good to hear from you.

One final thing. Typically I'll do an "Ask Me Anything" episode for milestones and next week is a big one. We're celebrating 300 episodes of The Next Right Thing. Instead of gathering your written questions, I would love to try something different and give you the opportunity to ask me a question with your out-Loud actual voice. Let's turn the table and let you interview me. Yes, maybe, I don't know. Simply visit the link in our show notes to leave a message 60 seconds or less. Be sure to share your name where you live and state your question giving context if necessary. I'll answer as many as I can get to in a reasonable amount of time. Remember, your questions will air on the episode or they may air on the episode and we want them to be helpful for the most amount of people, so if they are personal questions to your detailed life, just try to keep things fairly broad enough to be applicable.

Always remembering I'm a creative coach, an author, a spiritual director, but I'm not a licensed counselor, pastor or attorney, so don't ask me about money or therapeutic things,

and so of course you could ask things that you've always wanted to know what the P stands for, although if you follow me on Instagram, you already know that. I think this could be fun. Maybe. I don't know. We'll see. It depends on you.

Well, in closing, a few final thoughts from Greg McKeown's book, *Essentialism*, not on the hell yes, but on saying a graceful no. "Non-essentialists say yes because of feelings of social awkwardness and pressure. They say yes automatically without thinking. Often in pursuit of the rush, one gets from having pleased someone but essentialists know that after the rush comes the pang of regret, they know they will soon feel bullied and resentful both at the other person and at themselves. Eventually, they will wake up to the unpleasant reality that something more important must now be sacrificed to accommodate this new commitment. Of course, the point is not to say no to all requests. The point is to say no to the non-essentials so that we can say yes to the things that really matter. It is to say no frequently and gracefully to everything, but what is truly vital."

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