



### **300: Your Questions Answered**

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 300. It's so fun to mark the special milestone today, 300 episodes of The Next Right Thing. But first, if you're new here, 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 the generous support of subscribers to The Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more and subscribe at [emilypfreeman.substack.com](http://emilypfreeman.substack.com), where we'll continue the conversation that we start right here 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, well, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing.

In honor of the 300th episode of the Next Right Thing, today I'm giving you the microphone to ask me your questions. I love hearing your voices whenever I can and I think this will be a lot of fun. I'll do my best to offer some solid responses, if not answers. So listen in.

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Miriam: Hi Emily, I'm Miriam from Canada. In your episode from today, number 299, you mentioned collecting gurus is different from collecting teachers with intention. Can you share how to distinguish between the two, gurus and teachers? My email and Substack subscription buckets fill up quickly, and I think knowing the difference between these two can help me figure out how to sort through what I need and what's interesting, but distracting. I don't want to miss something, but I can't read everything. Thanks.

Emily P. Freeman:

Miriam, I think so many of us have this question and how we answer it might change over time. First, let me just say there is nothing technical in my choice of words here, the words guru and teacher. In regular conversation, you could use those interchangeably, but when I first talked about that phenomenon of collecting gurus, it was back in episode 32, so here at

episode 300, that was a lot of episodes ago, but it was born out of a time in my own life when I was feeling some uncertainty in a particular area of life. But rather than facing that uncertainty head on, at the time I was searching for clarity in other areas of my life that felt a little bit less scary and more accessible. So I had emails from an Instagram teacher, a business coach, a book launch guy, a course creation lady, a declutter-my-house guide.

I had results and follow-up results from all types of testing quizzes that I had been taking throughout the year about my personality type, my hair type, my marketing type, my dressing type. It was a whole thing. When your inbox looks like a lot of advice about a lot of different areas of life from a lot of different voices, it could be a sign that you've started collecting gurus again.

Now, seeking out teachers with intention, for me at least means listening to less people more deeply. It means committing for a season to learn from, observe or apprentice yourself to someone who can guide you in a particular way about the things that matter most. For me, collecting gurus feels frenetic, but choosing teachers feels intentional.

Now, here's the tricky part. The label itself is not really about the particular guru or the teacher. In some seasons, a particular training, for example, might be evidence of my guru collection. I don't need that training right now. It's distracting for me right now, but six months later, a different season of my life, that very same training could actually be a teacher that I choose with intention. Your faithful listening to this podcast this week could be you choosing your teacher with intention, but next month, depending on what's happening in your life, I could become part of your guru collection and you need to take a pause for a time.

So you see how gurus and teachers, that label, is very personal to you? It's not about the people themselves or about what they're teaching, it's about your mindset when you consume the content. Is it distracting you from what you want to be focusing on right now or is it encouraging to you? Is it generative in some way? That's how you know if the teachers that you're learning from are being gathered with a clear intention or if they're being collected in a distracted panic.

Rachel: Hi, Emily and listeners. This is Rachel from Iowa. My question to you, Emily, is what truths from the Bible have you held tightly to during times of transition in your life? Whether that's your kids moving on to college, whether that's having kids, whether that's getting married, just different transitions in life, what truths from the Bible or verses have you held onto to to keep moving forward? Thank you in advance for answering this.

Emily P. Freeman: Well, a few immediately come to mind. First of all, when I think about truths from scripture, I think about things that are true that we learn from the Bible. One of those things to me is what Jesus is like. In times of uncertainty, some words that West Stafford said come to mind a lot. He said, "Jesus never tells the children to grow up, but he

often told grownups to become like little children." And so whenever I see or notice, and John and I talk about this all the time, Jesus talking to you and welcoming the little children, that's something true that I learn from the Bible, that I hold closely in times of uncertainty. There have been times of doubt or questioning when I have felt alone in my faith or unsure about a faith community about what might be next. I think of John chapter six, where Jesus feeds the 5,000 and then walks on water and then starts to teach about how he's the bread of life and people lose their minds because what he was saying at that time was scandalous.

And then Jesus hears his followers grumbling and he asks if they're offended? And some of them leave. And so Jesus said to the 12 in verse 67, "Do you want to leave too?" And then in verse 68, Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God." That verse always gets me, and that's one I return to in times of doubt or questioning, no matter what transition of life I might be in the midst of.

And then I'll just say finally, maybe specifically during COVID, but during lots of times of life during parenting teenagers, during times when I had to make a big decision, but I wasn't really sure what move to make, the words from Psalm 23 have been and continue to be a living comfort to me, specifically, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me." And that line, "You are with me," is the very center of that poem. It leads up to that. And then if you count from the end of the poem of the Psalm, it leads back up to that. That, "You are with me," is the center part of Psalm 23, and that's something that I hold really close in all types of life transitions.

Brianna Brown: Hi Emily, this is Brianna Brown coming to you today from a little farm in Northeast Georgia. My question today is in regards to walking alongside someone who has to make a decision, but every option on the table is horrendously painful. To give a little context, my husband and I walked through discerning a decision a couple of years ago and each option we had in front of us we knew would result in a heartbreak and suffering for our family. However, we still had to make a choice.

So I'm curious as to how you would walk alongside someone who is going through the decision-making process, where no matter what they chose, pain would result from that decision?

Emily P. Freeman: So often in our decision-making process, we're working hard to avoid the big and terrible things. We want to choose well and we want to choose wisely. But at the most basic and honest level, I think we want to avoid pain. We want to avoid making a mistake and we want to keep ourselves and those who we love, we want to keep everyone from suffering. But there are those times, like you mentioned here, Brianna, where every option leads to pain, but we still have to make a choice. I'm so glad for the way that you ask this question. You ask, "How do we walk with someone who's going through this process?" And so I'll answer or respond as if I'm talking to you, the person walking with someone who's going through that process. And first, I would say you do it as a friend and not as a fixer. It's

almost always counterintuitive to point out the difficulty of something. We want to point to the silver linings, but sometimes there isn't one. So being the voice in the room who acknowledges or who is willing to acknowledge the impossibility, the heartbreak and that suffering that's sure to come, that can be a gift to people. It takes a lot of courage to hold space for pain.

Second, I would just say, to understand that if the person who has to make the decision tries to find the silver lining, let them. Hold space for that. This is their decision to make and you're here to be supportive not to make it for them. So allowing them their own journey of discovery, their own way of navigating discomfort, even if it's a way you disagree with, even if you see them spiritually bypassing something, I think allowing and trusting that they're on their own journey and you want them to have their own opportunity to meet God in this.

And sometimes it might look like them forcing a silver lining where there isn't one. I think we can sometimes get in the way of someone's own process when we force our process onto them. When we say, "But this is terrible and there's nothing good." For some of us, we need someone to acknowledge that. For others of us, we just need someone to hold space for our impossible hope and maybe us trying to paint a silver lining where there really isn't one. I think we can be friends who hold space for all of that in the midst of this type of difficult decision.

And I'd just say finally, in the quietness of your own heart, this can be a way to continue to wrestle with those unanswerable questions for yourself, not necessarily with the person who is making this difficult decision, but in your own heart of hearts, those secret places where we often hold close the questions that we all have, "Why does suffering exist? Why would God allow it? Where is God in the midst of it?" I think this can be an opportunity when we see someone facing an impossible choice to really begin to get honest about how this difficult decision for your friend or family member or maybe for you might continue to shape your own ideas about God, ideas that are always there but we might not be aware of them, but they shape how we interact in the world. They shape our capacity to hold hope and our own responses when we're confronted with our own impossible decisions.

So this could be an opportunity to bring those questions out into the light, if not the sunlight, maybe the candlelight, so that you can begin to know and name your own ideas about God in the midst of these really difficult decisions.

Jeannie: Hi, this is Jeannie in Minnesota. My questions for you and maybe for your husband as well, wondering about how you start to dream at this midpoint in life for your future? My husband and I are wrestling with this a little bit as we look ahead and the kids are moving out of our house and it feels like this great unknown, which is exciting, scary, but how do you dream together? What are some tools you use or maybe a process, if anything, as you look forward? Thanks.

John: Hey, Jeannie from Minnesota. I really love your question about how to dream in this midpoint in life. A couple of things come to mind. One is you using this word scary. I resonate with that word, but I just didn't imagine how helpful it would be to ask fear to leave the room. So when you're sitting down with your spouse having a conversation to just excuse fear. Fear is so powerful as you know, and it's also so freeing when it's not interrupting our conversations.

Another thing that comes to mind is just getting your kids' feedback. Now, that just depends on your kids, but pay attention to when your kids say, "Mom, dad, you should totally do that." That's important. They know us really well. It also could be good for our kids to see us as aging parents step out in faith and taking some risks. Maybe really, we are the ones that need to grow younger and to be dependent and trust God in this season of life. So that's always good for the kids to see.

And then finally, Emily and I, we like to live with a direction or just take 24 to 48 hours and say yes to an idea and see how it fits and feels and then regroup. Maybe go grab coffee and talk about it again after that period of time. Thanks again for including me and I hope this helps.

Eden: Hi Emily. My name is Eden and I am from Alberta, Canada, and I have been deeply encouraged by your words on this podcast for the last couple of years. And my questions for you are, what is a time or moment this year that you really truly felt like yourself? And secondly, what advice would you give to those of us who circle with having really high expectations for ourselves and then suffer from the disappointment that comes afterwards when those unrealistic expectations can't be met? Thanks, Emily.

Emily P. Freeman: A two-part question. Well, first, a time I felt like myself, honestly, honestly, honestly, was when I finally got to share about my new book coming out in March. Are you tired yet of me talking about it? You better not be because there's more to come, but I've been working on it in the quiet for a year and a half. So to finally be able to talk about it was a grounding relief. It's hard to put words to. Hitting publish on the post and episodes about it, I had the sense of, "Ah, okay, there you are again."

And as for the second part of your question about advice for those of us who have high expectations for ourself, first of all, I would say I deeply understand my dear. I've been working some with my own spiritual direction supervisor on recognizing when I'm holding myself in contempt and it happens more often than I care to admit. Something that's been helping me navigate this is actually related to your first question, to write down, I do this in my journal on some mornings, just a short bullet point list of things that will help me feel like myself today, a walk, a sit outside with my cat, a clear stop to the workday at the end of the day. There's nothing magic in these rhythms, but there is something human about them. And sometimes the reason why I'm so disappointed for not getting enough done or reaching my high impossible expectation is I forget I have limits. And they are, as my sister reminds

me, lovely limitations, that I am allowed to rest. That rest is, as Sally Breedlove says, "Allowing the present to be imperfect." And that is something that I need to practice more often.

Leslie Miller: Hi Emily, this is Leslie Miller and I live in Santa Barbara, California, and I was really intrigued by something you said on your episode around what's saving your life this autumn. You mentioned that you have learned over time to not necessarily talk about the thing that you're working on creatively while you're working on it, that it's better to just put your head down and get it done before releasing information out to the world. And something about that really resonated with me as a writer. I sometimes feel really uncomfortable trying to share what I'm working on as it's still coming together in my head. And so you validated an emotion that I'm having, and I would love for you to expand a little bit more on what you have found are the benefits of holding something closer until it's finished?

But also practically speaking, I was wondering what does it look like to respond kindly to people who are simply very curious about what an artist is working on? I found that people often want to know, and I haven't figured out a polite way to not share. And so then sometimes I overshare and feel uncomfortable after the fact that I've said a little bit more than I was ready to. Do you have any ideas for me as to what an artist can say when they're not quite ready to release their work into the world? Thank you.

Emily P. Freeman: Well, like most things, it's not necessarily a hard and fast rule that I always follow, but especially for bigger projects, like a book for example, so far I found that I prefer to preserve my creative energy for the work itself, rather than figuring out how to talk about the work so that someone else understands it. There's always a time for that, but for me, it's important to allow the work to be born and to grow and to have some roots and shoots, to have a life before we start exposing it to the elements of second opinions and potential threat.

Now, that's not to say I tell no one, that would be its own kind of threat. So it's good to have your trusted few, both friends and family, and maybe even some colleagues who you can run ideas by, who you can trust to come into the dark room without turning on the light and ruining the film, who will whisper and nod, point out problems or pitfalls, but who will not stomp all over your new idea.

And finally, I would say it's good to have a scripted response to those who ask, that you can give if you aren't ready to share so that you don't feel uneasy or caught off guard when people outside of your trusted few begin to ask some questions. For example, people ask me all the time. If I haven't seen someone in a long time, they'll ask me, "Are you writing again or are you writing another book?" And I say, "I'm always writing or I always have ideas." I just play it off as if, "Yeah, I'm writing," but that's because I'm always writing and I keep things broad.

If they ask if I'm working on another book specifically but I'm not ready to share the details, I might say, "I've got something in the works, but it's too soon to tell," or, "It's so kind of you to ask. I'll let you know when I've put more words to it," or, "Once it's ready, you'll be one of the first to know." Now, that's not always true, but sometimes it can be and it can keep the tone light.

Well, there's really no wrong, Leslie. There's only you doing what seems right at the time with the information you have at the time, that's knowing that you might say too much and regret it. And sometimes the way we know our boundary lines is unfortunately by crossing them. Give yourself permission to pause before answering any questions about yourself, and this is across the board, whether it's your personal life or your creative life. If the person asking is in a rush, that doesn't mean you have to be. And if they wait for you through your pause, then perhaps that's a sign that they might be truly curious and could be someone that you could trust. Well, we'll close with one final question for now.

Monica: Hi, Emily. Monica from Oregon here. I am currently in my cemetery, my favorite non-traditional daily spiritual practice, walking my dog. And I'm curious what your favorite untraditional daily spiritual practices and what do you notice or enjoy most about it?

Emily P. Freeman: Well, maybe you knew I would love this question, Monica. I'm so glad you asked it. I even have a series on Substack about unconventional spiritual practices, but I'm trying to think of one I haven't shared there. And I would say first for listeners, that I believe anything can be a spiritual practice, as we do it in collaboration with or in awareness of the spirit of God among us. And if that sounds too religious for you or that's not really language that you use, I would simply say spiritual practices are those things that remind you who you are, that are generative, that add joy, peace, patience, or kindness to your life.

So one of my favorites right now, you might not be ready, but you've said unconventional, so here we go. So I've been playing the free Tiles game on New York Times Games app. If you are not familiar, it's just a matching game of patterns. Now, I also do the mini crossword and I still play Wordle. Hello? But the Tiles game is the one that is becoming for me, an unconventional spiritual practice. Here's why?

First, it shapes and color without words, so I don't get distracted by trying to think of who's the main character on Seinfeld? Or whatever. Second, it requires thought, but not too much. But third mainly, it just is a spiritual practice because of when I tend to turn to it. I tend to play that little Tiles game in the afternoon when I'm tired, when I feel a bit out of control, when maybe there's been some conversations or some griefs that have already happened in the day and I need something to keep me occupied but not preoccupied, if that makes sense. It could be historically a time when I might reach for a book, but when reading feels like a bit too much, I turn to the Tiles game and I match motifs.

And as I do, I feel a little bit like a little kid, like I'm doing something that has no

consequence but still feels a little bit productive. And as I do, I imagine God is with me when I do it. It's simple. It's kind of near ridiculous. It's certainly unconventional, but matching those little tiles and sometimes getting them all right in a row is just one little way that I practice doing something in God's presence, something a little bit playful and something that reminds me I'm not in control, but I can still trust God even though I'm not sure what comes next.

Well, that little practice is saving my life right now. Thanks for asking. We could do a whole series here on the podcast too about unconventional spiritual practices. I love hearing about yours, Monica, thank you for the question. Mostly, I'm so grateful for those of you who are listening, have listened either since the very beginning or today for the very first time. It is an honor and a joy to talk about discernment and decision-making in my life and yours as we together continue to do our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 300 of The Next Right Thing. Now I have to say there were many other questions that I wanted to answer, but I wanted a little bit more time to consider them, like listener Sarah mentioned the quote, "When your life is falling apart, it's because you've outgrown it." And man, I had a lot of thoughts about that and I wanted to reflect more before responding. Or like listener Angie who asked for perspective on transition from a safe and predictable career into self-employment? Or Heather, who has two daughters and asked about some things maybe I've learned after raising teenagers? It is so fun to hear your voices, and I want to thank those of you who took the time to leave a message, but because of time, I wasn't able to get to all of them here. But I will choose these I just mentioned from Heather, Angie and Sarah, as well as some more to talk about on this week's Substack essay.

So if you aren't part of the community there, I hope you'll join in, find us at [emilypfreeman.substack.com](http://emilypfreeman.substack.com), and we'll continue this conversation where I'll answer some questions I couldn't get to. And we would love to have you join us there. For now, as always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com), where you can find a transcript of this episode and every other episode. Thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

To those of you, like I said, who've been around for all 300 episodes. Thank you for trusting me. It's always an honor to have you here. And again, if you are brand new, welcome. I hope you've found something of value to keep you coming back. Remember, I've said it already, my new book, *How To Walk Into A Room* is available to pre-order now. They'll be settling the print run soon, which means every pre-order is like a vote, letting retailers and the publisher know that this is a book you want to read, which helps to inform how many they may print. So click the link in the show notes to learn more about the book, or you can search *How to Walk Into a Room* by Emily P. Freeman wherever you buy your books.



In closing, a short word from Henri Nouwen who said, "The farther the outward journey takes you, the deeper the inward journey must be." As always, thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.