



### 307: What Worked in 2023

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 307. 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 are enjoying this podcast ad-free because of the generous support of subscribers to The Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more in subscribe at [emilypfreeman.substack.com](http://emilypfreeman.substack.com) where we 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, with chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing.

At the end of every year, I write down a list of what worked and what didn't work that year in the same way we had tip Barbara Brown Taylor for the question, "what's saving my life right now?" I give a nod to Ann Bogel for the question, "what worked this year?". I know she's not the only one to ask it, but it was her list that inspired my own many years ago. And so the way I like to do this particular reflection is I share my list of what worked for me this year here on the podcast as well as a few tips and resources for you if you want to make your own list. For the record, I also share a list of what didn't work, but I put that one in my monthly letter. If you want to get that on the last day of the month, you can sign up for it at [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter), and if you're already signed up, well, you can look forward to what did not work for me this year. But for today, we're talking about what has worked this year. Listen in.

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If you are afraid of or avoid reflection altogether because you either don't know where to start or you're a forward-thinking person or you're worried reflection will lead to regret, take heart, you have options. One option is for now, look back but only focus on what did work for you this year. Forget the what didn't work. That's what I'll be doing this episode so you can model your own reflection on this framework if it's helpful. But secondly, if you choose to consider what did not work for you, maybe think about it as a way to sit down next to yourself as you would a dear friend or a small child. You don't have to be a scolding parent

or a relentless critic. In fact, they're not allowed. What didn't work isn't a list of your failures. It's an evaluation of choices that you made with the information that you had at the time.

Now you likely have more information, so what do you know now that you didn't know? Then? This can be a generative practice, but if for you it doesn't feel that way, don't do that part. Just look back and consider what did work this year. And then finally, for me as a person of faith, I like to ask God to show me what I need to know today, nothing more and nothing less, and then I have to practice being gentle with myself with whatever emerges. Well, I've thought a lot about this and I'm not sure true transformation is possible without some reflection. And I do believe that's true, but I also believe that you don't have to do it all at once. Your pace is your pace. Now here's mine. Here are 12 things that worked for me in 2023. Quick note. I have these in a list all mixed up with personal life and professional life, so much like life, I'm going to go through them in no particular order so bear with me.

First thing. One thing that worked for me this year was hiring some new team members. This time last year, I was a little bit nervous heading into 2023 because I knew that I was going to need to hire two new team members. My executive assistant at the time, Ginna, was moving from one role on my team into a different role, and so that meant I had to both replace her and I had discerned over that last six months or so leading up to that time that there was a whole new role on my team that I was missing. Hiring used to be one of the most nerve wracking parts of my own work. Now, every author is a small business, just so you know, so it took me a long time though to see my work as a small business, which means that it also took me a really long time to make my first hire many years ago when I did that. It's still a bit of a nerve wracking thing because you wish you had grownups to come in and tell you how to do it or to do it for you.

But I have now, thanks to my work at Hope Writers for many years ... I no longer work there, but one thing I learned while I was there was the importance of finding the right people to sit in the right seats on your small business bus. And so I have gained some confidence and some clarity in what I'm looking for and in the importance of finding those right team members. However, it still can be a nerve wracking process. So this time last year I was entering into that, but I followed the process and found two new team members, Mary and Ashley, an operations manager and content manager, and now we've been working together. It's not been a year yet, but we're heading into our first year together, and that's something that really worked. I'm grateful for the time that I took to find the right people.

And by the way, every time I hire, which isn't that often, but every time I do, we have some incredible candidates. So it was not an easy process to choose, but I did trust the process and in that I think that that is something that worked for me this year was hiring slow and finding the right people for the right seats. So I really look forward to launching a book with these two and along with some other partners that we are linking arms with in the coming year.

Number two. The second thing that worked for me this year was my writing practice. As you now know, the first part of last year and even some of the year before was spent writing my next book. And so I had to develop a new rhythm of writing, which I did and it worked and I was so grateful. I basically wrote and worked on this book exclusively, especially in quarter one last year, from Thursday morning until Friday afternoon. Thursdays, I would do three 90 minute blocks of writing and Fridays I would do at least two 90 minute blocks of writing. I have found for me, I'll set a timer and that 90 minutes, there's something about it. 30 minutes is way too short. An hour, sometimes I'm just getting started. Two hours is too long. So for me, 90 minutes was good for that type of writing, and if I could get five of those 90 minute blocks per week, I found that to be really helpful in getting some traction in the type of work that book writing requires. Also this year under that same what worked in writing, under that writing umbrella, is starting a substack. The Soul Minimalist started in July and I was so happy that people joined.

I wasn't sure if you would. It's something I have been wanting to do for many years. I kept moving it from, we'll do that in 2021. No, we'll do that in 2022. And finally, 2023 was the year, and it was a little scary because it was a new type of writing. I'm still figuring out a rhythm for it, but it's been almost half a year and I feel like for the most part, for my first six months of it, it really has worked for me both in connecting with readers, in having a weekly rhythm of getting a new essay out every week, having some themes that I like to write around. And if this is your first time hearing about Substack, I talk about it in most episodes at the beginning, but it is a place where we often continue the conversation that we start here on the podcast.

So it's for anyone who wants to move beyond the pro-con list, on The Soul Minimalist on Substack is where often I'll share a little bit more than I do on the podcast and then always we can bring it into comments. Another thing there, just while I'm talking about it, is about half of The Soul Minimalists take advantage of the private Instagram group that we have. I hope to have even more fun things there in the coming year, but that's ... Like I said, we've got maybe 500 or 600 on there right now on the private Instagram account and we have double that who could be in there. So if you are a subscriber to The Soul Minimalist, a paid subscriber, then you also have access to that private Instagram account and just look for it in your welcome email. There's a link for you to fill out a Google form. It's fine. Everything's fine. That's not what this episode is about, but I did want to mention it. But I do feel like that writing practice has worked for me this year, at least book writing and Substack. And the practice does not always work every year so this year I feel like I found some rhythms and I'm really grateful for that.

A third thing that worked this year was teaching. I created a discernment workshop for a group of Episcopal clergy leaders in my local community, all based on my next book, How to Walk Into a Room. And this was a surprise speaking opportunity. It came about late in the spring and it actually happened in June. And again, it was a last minute commitment, but as soon as they asked, I was compelled by it and I just loved it. I loved the size of the group. I

loved the time we had together. I loved the space and the conversation. Mainly I loved the opportunity to lead a group of people in a room who were all facing the same direction. They were all Episcopal clergy. And I loved leading them through a framework that I had created. It was the first chance I had back in June, again, to try out some of the material that I had spent so much time with in the book.

And I was so grateful by the end of the day to realize it worked. They got it. They resonated with it. And so it reminded me again, though I don't have a ton of opportunity to exercise that teaching muscle these days, when I am able to do it, for example, in that workshop in June, as well as when I go out to Friends University and teach twice a year, just that posture of a teacher is one that I really enjoy and I feel like myself when I'm doing it. And so that reflection helps me think about if opportunities come up in the future for that, I'll pay closer attention because it's something that worked for me this year.

Number four. Having a dedicated work space. You might remember last winter or spring I was working on my sunroom office. I moved from a small back room in my house into a larger sunroom for my office, to use as my office. It's bright. I have a place for my books and my plants. I also have a place to meet one-on-one with local directees. I work as a spiritual director, and so some of my directees are able to meet me in my actual office, which is the first time ever that that's happened. And so I remember going through the process, the steps in the Cozy Minimalist community, by the way. You're a Cozy Minimalist, right? My sister's community where she teaches us this five phase movement to create the room that we've always wanted with a lot of the stuff we have right now.

And so I went through those five phases and it took several months, honestly, and I realized in that time that this is a process that works, but it's not necessarily quick. And so I did develop a lot of patience, but now that room is done and y'all, I've kept it pretty much how I had it in March, back when I finished the room, which tells me that I made the right choices and the weight was worth it. So having that dedicated workspace has been so helpful. It's really worked for me this year and I look forward to it continuing to work in the months and years to come.

Number five. Decide once date nights. This is a hat tip to two people. One is Kendra who reminds us of the importance of deciding once. Making decisions one time that we can continue over and over again. And then also my sister and her husband, Chad, who have a favorite place that they like to go eat. They go there most Friday nights. And one reason they do it is because they live in a small town and there's one cool restaurant that they can go to, so they just go there when they can, that one place. But for John and I, here in Greensboro, there's a lot of options and sometimes we sit around like, "Where do you want to eat?" "Well, I don't know. Where do you want to go?" Finally, this semester, this past school semester, we have picked a place and we go there not every single Friday night, but a lot of Friday nights. We'll just go there. If we have a date night, we'll just go there. And y'all, we've been ordering the same thing. We've been drinking the same thing. Sometimes we even sit in the same

place. And while I can't say we'll do it forever there, it's been a really nice pattern of nice habit, if you will, for us to just pick a place and go there and enjoy it and that's something that has worked for us this year.

I did tell John the other day, I'm like, "Maybe for next semester ..." I still think in schools. I'm not in school, but I still think in semesters. But for next semester, I thought maybe we'll pick a different place and order a different meal, but go there over and over again as our new decide once. We'll see. I don't know. Anything can happen.

Number six. Something that worked for me this year is having an unrushed entry into the new year. Basically what this means is that I give myself all of January to plan for the new year. Now, this is kind of true and untrue because the reality is for my work, we have our annual planning for the next year in September. So Ashley, Mary and I got together in September and we looked into the next 12 months until September of 2024, and we made some preliminary plans for work.

But when it comes to big picture, personal, family, and even some work stuff, rather than trying to cram it all into the end of the year with Christmas and New Year's and all that, I like to give myself the entire month of January to really think about the new year more granularly along with John. So John and I always have a date planned. Oftentimes for us it's a breakfast because John thinks better in the morning. And so rather than having it be a date night, we do a date morning where we talk about our own personal, what worked and what didn't work, and then some of our hopes for the following years. We like to do that together. So January is the new week between Christmas and New Year. At least for me.

Number seven. Fully owning my gift of discernment. Now, this one is something that's been growing over many years, but as Dr. Hillary L. McBride reminds us, trust is a process, not an event. And as I have been learning to trust myself and my own intuition, it definitely has been a process, but it's something that I have been naming and holding onto in a good way this year is recognizing and being proud of the fact that I am a person who can discern. I can make decisions based on that discernment. And it's not me as an island all by myself. It's not that I trust myself to the exclusion of trusting others or trusting God, but in partnership with others and with God and with myself, bringing my own voice to the table. I think this year has been maybe a key year in that for me, of owning that and knowing that and being able to sit down on the inside when it comes to trusting my own voice in the room.

And I do think writing *How To Walk Into a Room*, side note, has played a key part in that of being able to articulate some things that I have known but maybe haven't known how to put into words and putting them down on paper has really helped me realize like, oh, I can own this gift that I do have and I can trust it, and that's something that's worked for me this year.

Number eight is a recipe. It is the lazy genius chickpea bowl lunches. You guys, if you have not made her chickpea bowl, it's like a tomato chickpea Indian spices situation that I always double the recipe and always wish that I would've tripled it because it's so great heated over.

You can add sour cream, you can add cilantro. It's fantastic. I'll link to it. Ashley will link to it. Let's be real. Ashley will link to it for us, and you too can make a most delicious, wonderful Indian spicy lunch for yourself in 2024.

Speaking of Kendra, number nine something that's worked for me this year is monthly work days with Kendra. If you don't know, maybe you do, but Kendra Adachi, The Lazy Genius and I, have been friends for many years. Long before The Lazy Genius even was a twinkle in her eye. But we are friends in real life. We lived down the street from one another. But this year ... And maybe it started last year. I don't know. I don't know. But regardless, whenever it started, we both realized we live close together, but we don't see each other naturally often enough. And so we decided that at least once a month we were going to see each other on purpose. And so what we do is we have a second Thursday on the calendar, maybe it's the first Thursday, I don't know, but a Thursday of every month we meet together to co-work. She has work. I have work. We chat a little bit.

But for the most part we do work and then we have lunch together afterwards, and that's where we can catch up on life. Now, that's not to say that's the only time we ever see each other, but if a month goes by and we haven't seen each other, we know we can count on that work time, and that has been so life-giving for me this year, and it's been a way for me to see my friend that I don't always get to see just naturally in everyday rhythm of life so I'm really grateful for that time. And if you have a friend who has somewhat of a flexible schedule and it's somebody that you don't see very often but you want to, I highly recommend co-working days.

Number 10. I feel like this one makes it on my list every year. Survivor with Jeff Probst, you guys. Sorry, not sorry, but this is one of my favorite shows on television. We watch it every week. John and Luke and I watch it together. Now that the twins are out of the house, it's been really fun to see some new rhythms of life that John and Luke and I kind of get into. Poor Luke. He's a junior in high school and he hangs out with his parents. It's fine. Everything's fine. But we watch Survivor when it's in the fall season and then hopefully when it's on the spring season, we'll do it again. But it's such a great game and we love to watch it and it worked again this year and I'm just glad for it. It had to make the list.

Number 11 is backyard fires. Well, y'all, John got ahold of a solo fire pit. You know those smokeless ones that you've maybe seen places? Well, we got one and it's fantastic, and we've used it several times now. John had his 50th birthday gathering in the backyard in August, which we did not need a fire pit then, but the spirit of the fire pit was alive and well that night. But we've also had small groups around the fire. We've had our neighborhood chilly night with the fire pit. And it has been such a lovely practice. It's been something that we realized this is so easy just to have a fire in the backyard and have people over or just for our own family and always having s'mores supplies on hand, summer, winter, fall, and spring is pro tip that you don't want to miss.

One final thing that's worked this year was my word for the year. It was grow, and I think I have. I knew it would show itself in ways that were different than what typically comes to mind with that word, and I was right, but that's something I'm sure I'll unpack more in my slow entry into January. Two quotes stand out in this growing place where I now find myself. I'll share these two quotes and just know in advance that I don't fully have an explanation for them, but when I think about some of the growth that's happening in me and around me, these two quotes speak to that in a small and maybe even big ways. The first is I'm growing in my curiosity about and my relationship with the sacred text of my faith, the Bible. I'm seeing it with new and more curious eyes. I'm holding scripture, the scripture I've grown up with, and considering its purpose and its form. And I'm nodding my head with this quote from Rachel Held Evans who wrote in her book *Inspired*, "Our relational God has given us a relational sacred text. One that should we surrender to it reminds us that being people of faith isn't as much about being right as it is about being part of a community and restored and restorative relationship with God."

Well, that quote continues to stick with me and reminds me of the words of Leslie Newbigin who said, "God did not write a book but formed a community." And my curiosity peaks and I asked the question, how does this inform how we read the book we have? Well, the second quote that I wanted to share is from Cole Arthur Riley in her book, *This Here Flesh*. When I read it this year, it's one that jumped off the page when I read it the first time. It grabbed on and it hasn't let go. She said simply, "You will do what you can until you can't, and then you'll fall asleep on the chests of those who love you." This right there, in that one line, is something of what it's meant for me this year to grow.

Well, that's a list of 12 things that worked for me this year. And I'll be honest and tell you, it did not take me long to make this list because as I've said before, one of my most consistent decision-making practices is to reflect on my life as I live it so that when the moment of decision comes, I'm a little more ready. Using my Next Right Thing guided journal helps me to keep a list of what I'm learning after every season, and that list helps to inform what's working. I also have a life giving and life draining list that I keep on a monthly basis, and this episode is a result of a foundational practice that I've been cultivating for years, growing from my deeply rooted belief that you don't have to wait until the end of the year to reflect on your life, but if you do want to wait until the end of the year, reflecting on your life as you go makes it so much easier.

Well, mostly here at the end of the year, I want to say thank you for listening to *The Next Right Thing*. Any creative work is an offering and any creator knows it's not a given that their work will be heard, much less received or loved. I'm always aware of the options available to you of the many people you could be listening to, of the many responsibilities and questions and burdens that you're carrying, so the fact that you choose to continue to show up here and spend a few minutes with me together, wow, that is a true honor and something that I'm grateful continues to work. Here's to another year of listening to our lives, of discerning how God is moving in us and among us and of doing our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 307 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of naming what worked in 2023 can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. As we close out this year, I want to extend to you again a giant thank you for being here. Having your attention is not something I take for granted, and I'm grateful every week to have you. If this podcast means something to you, it would mean so much to me if you could take one minute and do a couple of things. If you could subscribe to The Next Right Thing where you listen, this makes it so when a new episode's released, it will automatically download wherever you listen. All you have to do is tap the plus sign in your podcast app or just click on the word follow. Secondly, if you're willing to leave a review while you're there, that will make it so that other people can find The Next Right Thing and know if it's for them. For example, one listener wrote, "I've been feeling the heaviness of a new season and confusion at how to move forward. I was using my Next Right Thing journal and a list of episodes was recommended. Listening now, and it's a balm to my soul." That's something I'm thrilled to hear, and I would love to hear more. Just drop a review at Apple Podcasts and I say thank you in advance for your time.

Well, if you want some help to reflect this very week, in addition to the Next Right Thing guided journal, I also have a list of 10 questions that you can ask yourself at the end of the year or really at the end of anything. It's a simple one-page download that you can get in the show notes and we'll email it to you, of course, for free. Just visit [emilypfreeman.com/10questions](http://emilypfreeman.com/10questions). That's the number 10, 10, questions. When you download the 10 questions, you'll be added to the list to receive my list of things that did not work this year, or you can add your name at [emilypfreeman.com/letter](http://emilypfreeman.com/letter) and we'll send you that letter at the end of the month.

Well, 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 and every episode. A big thanks to my content manager, Ashley Sherlock, who's on Team EPF. She creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized. We make The Next Right Thing in collaboration with the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound, so a big thanks to them as well.

Well, in closing, I'll share a couple of collect prayers I wrote this year. That's a practice I started after learning the form from poet and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama at a spiritual director's retreat last year. It's where you start with a name of God, then you unfold the name. You make one request, then you unfold the request. And then you end with a word of praise, the amen. Here are two collect prayers to close out our final episode of the year. Creator God, who knows what it is to focus, to make something out of nothing, give me your wisdom to discern the art from the meandering so that my making will be a gift to someone else. God of our memory, who was there and is there and sees it all, show me what I need to know so that I can write, create, teach, listen, work, and live with freedom and joy for the future. Amen. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.