



### **309: How to Walk into January Like a Soul Minimalist**

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 309. 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](http://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. It's good to be back in my podcasting chair.

Thanks to all of you who filled out our reader and listener survey last week. Your responses will help us so much to know not only who you are and what resonates the most, but also where you live and what decisions are giving you the most trouble these days. Well, I've now declared January to be the new week between Christmas and the New Year. And in today's episode, we'll unpack how to make it so. Listen in.

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From Winter Song by Ingrid Michelson and Sarah Bareilles, they say that things just cannot grow beneath the winter snow, or so I have been told. And so it's January. And maybe you're wondering, as I nearly always do this time of year, if it's possible to enter gently and with grace, even if the last of December was wild and unruly, unpredictable, or full.

Maybe you had good intentions to spend that very special week after Christmas and before the new year in reflection and in rest if you were able to get it, but things didn't quite happen that way or something came up, or you just wanted to let yourself off the hook from having to do a thing, manage, plan, scan and manipulate your time into something productive again. Well, if that's you, I've got good news. As I said, I declare January to be the new week between Christmas and the new Year, which means instead of trying to cram all that planning and reflection into just one week, let's spread it all the way out.

Reflection is a gift that doesn't respond kindly to rushing. There's no wrong. We'll enter gently and with care, remembering all along the way, we are not behind. In other words, we've got time. Reflection is a lifestyle, not an event. So to enter January, like a soul minimalist is to believe that's true, and then to act accordingly. We'll use some hopefully by now familiar movements that we've repeated here often when we talk about soul minimalism. But first, let's review what we mean by the phrase. You know the word soul, and you know the word minimalist. So what happens when we put them together? Author and minimalist, Joshua Becker, defines minimalism as the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of anything that distracts us from it. We could say the same thing about soul minimalism, except instead of focusing on our external life, a soul minimalist does this for their internal life. In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker J. Palmer poses the question, is the life I'm living the same life that wants to live in me?

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. These are words I've read and returned to for many years. I've said them many times here on the podcast. And it's a lovely sentiment, but the reality of its practice might be overwhelming, because it's one thing to feel the pressure of an unmade decision. It's another to add the abstract expectation of listening to your life. So this could feel like a weight you're unable to bear simply because you don't know how. Well, the reality of your inner life is never going to arrive as a flashing headline in clear English or clear language. It's never going to come as a link in your newsfeed that you can click and read all about it. The life that wants to be lived in us exists, and it is there, but we may not know what it is unless we begin to turn our ear toward it and make space for hearing those low tones of desire and gifting, of community and of calling.

Cultivating minimalism in the soul is one way to do that. So the question then becomes, what do I value most for my inner life, and what can I remove that will distract me from it? If you want to be more minimalistic in your home, then you may get rid of all the stuff you're holding onto. As a soul minimalist, I try to pay attention to what has a hold on me? What concerns are occupying my imagination? What old questions am I still carrying? And what new questions have come up? To answer some of these in January, you'll want to engage in the five movements of the soul minimalist. The first is to name your January posture. Now for you, because this is the beginning of a year, you might want to think of this just for January, or even extend it into looking ahead for the whole year. What might you want your general posture to be this year? Perhaps for you, that might come in the form of choosing a word for the year. Maybe you've already done that.

You might want to take the whole month to see what rises up from within. If there are themes that keep repeating in your questions, listen to both your joys and your anxieties, your eagerness and your hesitations in order to name this posture, or if you like the practice of the one word for the year in order to do that. These joys, anxieties, eagerness, and hesitation, all of these are evidence of your life, and they will provide important arrows to what you might want your January, or even your whole year to be. We're not trying to

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predict the future here. We're simply trying to orient ourselves in a particular direction on purpose, because the reality is we're going to be moving in a direction anyway, so why not give ourselves some time to think about how we might want to do that from the inside out. A second movement that can help with that practice is to create space.

I mentioned last week that I've been writing online for 17 years now in one form or another, and while many, many things have changed, one of the things that has remained the same, and I can't remember exactly when I came up with a tagline, but it was early on, and it was that I write to help create space for your soul to breathe, and this concept of creating space has remained with me. It's looked different over the years. I've done it in different ways, and maybe with some different emphasis, but the concept has always been there, and I hope it always will be. So here, even though we're talking about soul minimalism, this may be where you do want to create some literal space in your life. Some of you may have left your own Christmas tree up, for example, until epiphany, and now that's past. So you're doing the closure work of moving it out and making physical room in your actual space. For what? Maybe you know, or maybe you don't. Maybe you leave that space where the tree was actually empty just to kind of see what it might inspire.

Well, the same can go for your inner life. You might want to create some space in the form of time by setting a timer and just listening to the silence or putting time on your calendar like it's an appointment. But really, it's just time for you to think and dream a bit. And when I say to put it on your calendar, I mean you could schedule 30 minutes like you would a phone call or a Zoom meeting, but instead of showing up for a phone call and having to have a Zoom meeting, you actually get to just think and be a person and dream a little bit and look out the window. That's what I mean by creating space. Maybe you just need to schedule some time for your soul to catch up to your body, as Eugene Peterson so eloquently put it. The third movement is to ask yourself what needs my attention? When you get that time that you schedule, however small it is, ask yourself one question, what needs my attention? This is a question for a gentle January, one that may take the whole month or more to answer. What needs your attention, body, mind, and soul? What needs your attention at work at home and your family? What needs your attention in your heart, in your conversations, in your physical surroundings, in your physical response? This doesn't mean you are automatically to act and to fix anything, but naming what needs your attention can be a clarifying practice, even if you aren't sure what to do next.

The fourth movement of a soul minimalist is to choose your absence. In Kevin DeYoung's book, *Crazy Busy*, he says this, "The biggest deception of our digital age may be the lie that says we can be omni-competent, omni-informed, and omnipresent. We must choose our absence, our inability, and our ignorance, and choose wisely." As you set goals, choose a word for the year, plan your schedule, whatever you're doing as you look ahead, develop the habit of choosing your absence on purpose as you plan, rather than having it be chosen for you by default. And so getting quiet and listening to the heartbeat of your own life rather than looking outside of yourself for better, more important opportunities is going to be key

to this fourth movement of choosing your absence.

Choose your absence so that your presence will have more impact. This will not be easy, especially if your fear of missing out is particularly strong, but if you keep your true values before you, what really matters to you in this season? This will help you to not make decisions based on that fear of missing out or on some type of vanity reason, like what might impress someone else, or even what someone else might expect. Your work is your work. Your pace is your pace. You don't have to keep pace with anyone else.

Finally, number five, this fifth movement is to plan your presence. In other words, where do you want to show up in January? Where do you want to show up this year? To help consider your own presence, you could ask, what would be inner life giving for me this season or this year? You could even look at it in terms of quarters. How do I want to show up in winter, spring, summer, fall? How can I plan my presence first and on purpose before all the other things start to crowd out the things that I might want to do on purpose? One of the things that can help to think about this fifth movement, about planning your presence is to keep Dr. Sandra Dalton Smith's seven types of rest in mind. In her book *Sacred Rest*, she identifies those seven types as physical, mental, emotional, sensory, creative, social and spiritual.

These are all types of rest that we all need, and we might be burnt out in one of them and not realize that that's actually a type of rest that we just haven't thought to cultivate on our own lives. And so as we enter into January like a soul minimalist, it means rather than looking at the seven areas of rest and naming where we really need a break, use this list to look ahead and to plan your presence to the extent that you have the ability to do so because it might not always be possible, but thinking about how do I want to show up in these seven areas of my life on purpose so as to minimize future burnout in one of these areas. For example, a type of rest that I often overlook but always seem to need is sensory rest. It's not something that I plan for though, so usually I only realize that I need that type of rest once I haven't gotten it and it's too late.

So a way to be a soul minimalist in January is to look ahead into the year and see places where I might become overstimulated sensory wise, like if I've been traveling a lot, for example, look at the calendar and see what's coming up and maybe begin to anticipate, okay, where am I probably going to need some sensory rest? And go ahead and plan a focus day or plan a rejuvenation day after an event where I might be overly stimulated. Do that on the front end instead of realizing it and needing to take a sensory rest during a time when maybe I didn't plan for it and I actually can't get it. So it's just a practice of looking ahead and planning as much as we're able to. We're not always able to, but doing it on purpose on the front end rather than waiting until the burnout has already arrived.

So if you like me, hope to extend that often magical, but not quite enough week between Christmas and the new year, well, I raise my glass to you and say, let's take it all the way into January, and maybe February too. What do you want your posture to be? What intention do

you have for the month or the year? What invisible thoughts, beliefs, obsessions, addictions, or mindsets are keeping you from leaning into that intended posture? What needs your attention? Where can you choose your absence? How do you want to plan your presence in your body, soul, and spirit? What would be inner life giving for you? Where might you look for God? As you consider all of these questions, as you anticipate the seven types of rest you're going to need, may you have the courage to pick what you like and the patience to see how it grows as you do your next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to episode 309 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of walking into January like a soul minimalist can be 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 online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) or on Instagram @emilypfreeman, and you can join *The Soul Minimalist* for just \$5 a month on Substack where we continue the conversation. We begin here on Tuesdays. Even if you can't swing the \$5 a month right now, you can still join at the free level where you'll receive weekly updates of what we're talking about so you can join in when resources allow and the conversation really piques your interest. Thanks to the team at Immutable who faithfully edits our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

Well, y'all, we've got just nine weeks, nine weeks until the release of *How to Walk Into a Room*, which is my brand new book coming out March 12th. If you pre-order now, we'll let you know very soon about some free gifts. We'll send your way. We're just finalizing some of those details. In the meantime, if you've already pre-ordered, or if you do so now or anytime between now and March the 12th, you will be able to get access to those free gifts as soon as we announce them. So order now and hang onto your receipt. We'll put a direct link in the show notes to make it easy for you to pre-order. But just so you know, you can basically pre-order *How To Walk Into a Room* wherever you like to order books. So support your favorite indie, go to Amazon, Barnes and Noble, whatever makes sense for you and your heart. But as you do so, save that receipt, and then you can redeem your bonuses when they're ready. And y'all, I think you're going to love it. That's all I'm going to say.

We'll, in closing, a poem by Wendell Berry called *The Cold*. "How exactly good is it to know myself in the solitude of winter, my body containing its own warmth, divided from all by the cold, and to go separate and sure among the trees cleanly divided thinking of you perfect too, and your solitude. Your life withdrawn into your own keeping. To be clear, poised in perfect self suspicion toward you as though frozen. And having known fully the goodness of that, it will be good also to melt."

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