



313: The Liturgy of Lightheartedness

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 313. 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. If you struggle with decision fatigue or with 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.

Today's episode is brought to you by my new book that releases five weeks from today. How to Walk Into a Room will help you discern what to do next when you're carrying questions about spaces, relationships, or groups that you're part of, and it will also help you to develop the art of knowing when it's good to stay to fight for change, and to ask good questions, or if it might be time for you to gather your things, bless your experience and say your goodbyes. How to Walk Into a Room will help you navigate all kinds of endings, the ones you choose and the ones that are chosen for you. If you order the book anytime between now and the release day on March 12th, you have free gifts waiting for you, including a brand new audio collection in the Quiet Collection app, which is called Blessings for Hellos and Goodbyes, and a companion downloadable workbook to go along with it to help and name the hellos and goodbyes of your life. Learn all about it at emilypfreeman.com and start listening to those blessings today. Now for today's episode. Listen in.

At the end of December, I shared what worked in 2023 here on the podcast, but for my letter subscribers at the end of the year, I also shared five things that did not work for me in 2023. There were more than five things that didn't work for me to be honest, but the letter was already very long, so I only shared five of them.

One of the things I listed that didn't work for me last year was caring too much, specifically as it relates to parenting. As it turns out, this is a pattern. Two years earlier in my what didn't work list for 2021, I shared a similar sentiment. One of the things on that list in 2021 that didn't work was one word: parenting. Parenting did not work for me in 2021, and it was the

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hardest, mchardiest year of our live long lives. In fact, not a lot worked for a lot of us that year, but I'll say parenting teenagers through the COVID years... I mean, I don't know, do I have words? It was perhaps one of the hardest things I've ever done. Partly it was their age, mostly it was ours.

How do you parent in wisdom and with grace when you're in a whole different generation than your kids? And for those of you who are caregivers for your parents, the same rings true, but in the other direction. What's it look like when you have your own life experience, but they have their own life experience too and they're real different? What about when you're questioning some of the same things they're questioning? What about when you feel like you're the parent, so you're supposed to know what you're doing, or you're the kid to aging parents and you feel like they're supposed to know what to do?

I'll tell you what, I was a great parent before I had kids. Well, this is what I knew then in 2021, and it's what I still know now in 2024. And that is that the most balancing act I've done so far in my life is knowing when to step all the way in and when to jump all the way out. The stakes always seem high, the list is always long, and shame and fear and regret don't take a single minute off. So all of this is mostly normal stuff that a lot of caregivers say and stuff that they feel no matter the age of those for whom they care.

But back to why parenting didn't work for me specifically that year is I think it's not just the circumstances that were difficult. I mean that was true, but it's also how I responded to the circumstances. How I forgot to breathe, how I took myself too seriously, how I forgot to be my own friend, how I compared my parenting choices to the choices of the imaginary good parent who lived inside my head. Well, at that time, our kids were 15 and 18, and now our youngest is 17 and the twins are 20. And I still feel all those ways, but the most helpful advice I've received this past year that's made the biggest difference is to stop caring so much, not in a neglectful way, but in a loving and lighthearted way.

When I shared about this in my newsletter, the one where I shared what did not work in 2023, I received a lot of messages back from readers, maybe from you wanting to know more, what does this look like? How can we actually stop caring so much without neglecting our responsibilities as parents or our kids or the person for whom we're caring? What does it look like? But no, really what does it look like? Well, I want to approach this like a soul minimalist because I don't know how else to do things, and that is to simplify and then to apply. First, we'll give it a name and then we'll put it to practice. We'll do it together as we always do, and we'll take it slow.

So giving it a name this way of lightheartedness, what does it look like? I'll give it three names, how about that? First, I've heard John Eldredge talk about this as benevolent detachment. He teaches that this is when you release everything and everyone to God. You empty your soul of all the chaos and the clutter so that you can then receive something of the presence of God. This is not a checking out or a being cynical or anything like that, but in

love, it's truly releasing everything to God. Saint Ignatius of Loyola might call it a holy indifference or an internal freedom. This kind of freedom isn't so much about a freedom from, although there's something in that, but it's more a freedom to.

Having a holy indifference does not imply a lack of care, but it does mean being detached enough from things or from experiences or people to be able to hold them or release them depending on the leading of God. It's having the capacity to let go of what pulls you away from God and others while staying engaged with what draws you near to them. It's a matter of having the ability to maintain an inner peace even in the midst of outward uncertainty. And so the way I think of benevolent detachment, John Eldredge's words, or having a holy indifference is by cultivating a liturgy of lightheartedness where I can sit down on the inside even if I'm standing up on the outside. What does it look like to cultivate this? Well, now we've named it, I call it a liturgy of lightheartedness. If you prefer benevolent detachment or holy indifference or interior freedom, they all work. So we have a name for it, but spoiler alert, this does not come easy.

Irish philosopher or novelist Iris Murdoch said these memorable words that I often return to: "At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over." That means that the person who we are becoming on the daily will influence the choices we make on the spot. That means if we are people who hold on tightly to worry, outcome management and catastrophizing, then the decisions we will make will reflect a terrified heart. That means that the mental and emotional liturgies we engage every day always influence the decisions we make.

This word liturgy comes from the Greek words *laos*, meaning people, and *ergo* meaning work. Liturgy is often described then as the work of the people or also work done on behalf of the people. In other words, it's an action that invites participation for the good of the whole, not just the one.

When we practice anything in a liturgical way, it's something we do in action with a communal purpose or for the communal good. And so a liturgy of lightheartedness is not just for you the caregiver, it's for the good of us all. So how? The words of Jesus come to mind, Jesus who said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will also," in Matthew 6. When my treasure is in certainty, getting it exactly right or exactly wrong, or being all things to all the people, that's where my heart lives and it will nearly always be crushed there.

But what if I imagined putting my heart someplace else? What if we could experience in our daily life the theology of Jesus in Matthew 11 who said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, let me teach you, because I'm humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear and the burden I give you is light." This is the lighthearted posture described in 1 Peter 5:7 that says in the Message version, which is my favorite, "Live carefree before God, he is most careful with you." This is an outcome of having a high Christology the

belief that the life of Christ can and does make an actual difference in my actual life.

The action is living like it's true, living like I'm not alone even though I walk through valleys of shadows. The action is loving my kids and caring what's going on in their lives and making sure they're safe to the degree that I'm able to do so. And the action is choosing not to overcare today, choosing not to overfunction. I can just regular care and regular function and leave the rest to God.

My friend Amy Brown who has kids a bit older than mine, she gave me some of my favorite advice. She said when she prays for each of her kids, she imagines taking them by the hand and walking them straight to Jesus, and imagines Jesus taking them by the hand and trusting their care to God. This form of imaginative prayer is effective not only when you're caring for children, but when you're caring for anyone. Sometimes there's flow and other times I'm a mess of anxiety in this practice. I've been practicing this though imperfectly and it's saving my life.

If you are a caregiver who cares too much right now, I want to turn to you and say, you're doing such a good job. You love your small people or your big people and you want the very best for them. This room you've been in, the one where rest feels impossible and worry is the currency and stability feels like it's not allowed in the door, I have good news. This room of over-parenting, over-caring and over-functioning is not the only kind of room there is. There are other rooms, more spacious ones where it's possible to still care, but not to carry, where it's possible to love without losing yourself. It's possible to provide space for them to become who they are becoming and you enjoy their presence. And it's possible to be a little kinder to yourself in the process while remembering that as they are people who are becoming, so are you.

Here's to knowing that whatever you're going through, whatever you're going through, someone else is going through it too. Here's to finding a practical way to lovingly detach. Here's to learning a holy indifference. Here's to cultivating a liturgy of a light heart. Here's to God being bigger than we thought. Here's to doing our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 313 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of cultivating a liturgy of lightheartedness 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, you know, they're making our lives.

As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman, and you can join The Soul Minimalist community on Substack for just \$5 a month where we continue the conversation that we start here. Even if you can't swing that \$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 maybe the resources allow and the conversation

piques your interest. We also have scholarships available that you can learn more about on the about page at Substack at The Soul Minimalist. So check out that to learn more.

Thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

In closing, I want to share the Welcoming Prayer by Father Thomas Keating, and I'll note that if you want to borrow this prayer, I have recorded it, a clean recording, a standalone clean recording all by itself, and that's available for free in the Quiet Collection app. It's for iPhone or for Android devices. You can go to download the Quiet Collection app for free, and when you do, you'll see the borrowed prayer section, and this is one of them. You can listen to it every morning if you want to, I know people who do that, or in the evenings and pray along with me. I found it to be an appropriate practice, especially when I'm over-functioning in parenting or in caring for others in general.

So here's the Welcoming Prayer: "Welcome, welcome, welcome. I welcome everything that comes to me today, because I know it's for my healing. I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions. I let go of my desire for power and control. I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure. I let go of my desire for survival and security. I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself. I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within. Amen."

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