



396: How to Find and Follow Arrows

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 396.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. 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.

I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in North Carolina with my family and through my work have helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, work, and life.

Surprising to absolutely no one who has been here for five minutes, I submit that the way to begin considering what might be next for you is not by trying to see the future. Instead, it begins with looking to the past. But then what do you do with what you see? I submit you begin to look for arrows. If you are in a season of considering what might be next in your own life and need a bit of a starting point, this episode is for you. Listen in.

Over nine years of hosting this podcast, I get asked the most questions when I talk about arrows. What are they, how can we find them, and how are they useful in decision making?

First it's important to know what an arrow is NOT. It's not a sign from the universe, a message in disguise, or something mysterious you need to decode. An arrow is not a sign.

It's also important to understand that you don't have to look for arrows every time you make a decision. In fact sometimes if you try to, you'll hinder your own progress and get on your own nerves. Certain types of decision lend themselves to arrows more than others. That's where we'll begin - let's talk about 3 common types of decisions.

1. Daily Decisions

One-step daily actions in ordinary life.

- Who will drive carpool this week
- Where to meet a friend for lunch
- What to wear or eat
- What to read, watch, or listen to

These don't necessarily lend themselves well to the practice of looking for arrows – they are one-step decisions: Question and Answer. Who, What, Where about the everyday things of life that have neutral consequences most of the time.

2. On the Spot Decisions

Things you can't plan for like unexpected conversations and sudden emergencies that require immediate action.

- A late night argument with a partner
- Questions from a teenager in your life
- A conversation with the woman whose car you just rear-ended
- Resolving conflict with a difficult client

These decisions are important, but there's no time to look for an arrow.

This is part of my larger work, why spiritual formation is so important – the importance of spiritual formation and how it relates to the decisions we make.

because how we show up when we're on the spot is a direct result of who we are becoming when we're off the spot.

We can't cultivate our character real quick when we're resolving conflict or navigating chaotic waters with a teenager. The time is NOW, ready or not.

So unlike the daily decisions, these in the moment decisions may have great consequences for our lives and the lives of others, and unlike the daily decisions they aren't so easy as $1+1=2$. There is nuance and wisdom and listening and humility involved. And these are not simple decisions.

This 3rd type of decision is the one we'll park on now:

3. Big Picture Decisions

These are the decisions that we have in our lives where growing our awareness for arrows will be a supportive resource for us as we move forward in wisdom: Decisions that involve Important areas of life where you have multiple options, unclear desire, and a fair measure of time to consider your options: these big picture decisions may (but don't always) fall into one of these categories: education, vocation, relationships, faith, finance, social justice, health.

- Where or how to school my children or myself?
- What is mine to do based on my vocational call or relational responsibility?
- Should I stay in this job or is it time to move on?
- Is this church one where we can both contribute and thrive?
- What treatment options are best to pursue?

Arrow awareness becomes easier with time and practice.

Just like you aren't born knowing how to garden or make a chocolate cake or parent children, you also aren't born knowing how to make decisions. This is something that can be and I would argue **MUST BE** learned.

These are the **TYPES** of decisions that will lend themselves best to arrows.
So what is an arrow?

- Based on what you know (not what you don't know)

In other words, an arrow probably won't be something **WAY** out of left field and it's not going to be a movement where you have to overcome a lot of missing information. It's going to be based on the information you **HAVE** (even if it's small)

- Will align with your core values (but that doesn't mean they will always make full sense)

A true arrow won't point you in a direction that violates what you value most. I think in the world of psychology they would call this ego syntonic rather than ego dystonic - In other words it will be in harmony with who you believe yourself to be and what matters most to you.

- Almost always begin with a verb (An action, a small decision, or a mindset shift)

Arrows are not static but active. Words like: Call, make, create, reach out, tell, purchase, ask, hire, finish, write, send, schedule, connect, rearrange, stop, start, believe, ignore

- One next right thing (probably the first step of several) - this is the simplest definition which is finding and following arrows is honestly just another way to say what is your next right thing. Not the next 5 things, not the next big thing and not the final answer or even a full answer. Just one next right thing. That's what we're looking for when we talk about arrows.

What arrows or pre-arrows might look like: (including but not limited to)

*When you don't know what to do **ULTIMATELY** but you know what to do **FOR NOW***

A pre-arrow – that's something that happens that may lead to an arrow:

A gut feeling

An affirming scripture or prayer

A repeated thought / idea

The result of a conversation with someone you trust

From these you may find an arrow in the form of an action:

Buying time

A follow up conversation

A scheduling decision

A small next step

If you're wondering if something is an arrow or not, here are a couple of small TESTs to try:

The 51/49 test

we can't wait to feel 100% to Zero percent or we will never make a decision. We can only do the best we can with what we know and sometimes there's only a 1 percent win. Between these two choices, is there one that is 51 percent yes?

That means there's 49 percent no. That's heavy and weighs a lot! But it's still a little bit less yes than the other choice. 51/49 is still a decision.

The 24 hour test

Decide in your head, tell no one, and see how it feels for a full day. Then evaluate

The "no choice" test

Imagine that the thing you are questioning - is it time to quit my job? For example if that's your question - if it disappeared completely, how would you feel? If your boss called you into their office today and said thank you but your services are no longer needed or we're downsizing or our company was bought and they're cleaning house. What would that be like for you?

- Would it feel more like an opportunity or more like a roadblock?
- Would you feel slightly hopeful or disappointed?
- Would you feel relieved?
- Would you be compelled to do whatever you can to change their mind?

The no choice test definitely requires some imagination, but it can be one way to get at least a preliminary pulse on how you really feel about a situation.

When you have a decision to make that is beyond those daily decisions and allows more time than the on-the-spot decisions, it will be helpful to think about arrows – not an ultimate answer or solution to your decision-making question, but one next right thing you can do. Rarely are decisions only one step. Usually they are made in a series of many smaller decisions over time. As we move in wisdom, gratitude, and in a spirit of prayer we can trust that our decisions are sound. If we take a step and it turns out poorly, it doesn't mean we chose wrong it may just mean now we have more information.

The more we are able to discern arrows as we go, the more confident we will become as we make our decisions. And it always begins with doing just our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 396 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of finding and following arrows 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 that our daily decisions are making our lives.

If you want examples of arrows I have lots of them in my “How to Find and Follow Arrows” workshop inside substack. When you subscribe you'll have instant access to it. We'll link directly to the workshop in the show notes to make it easy for you to find it.

As always you can also find me on line at emily p freeman dot com or on instagram at emily p freeman. This episode was edited by the team at Unmutable and organized by Ashley Sherlock.

In closing, a few words from Melody Beattie in her book, The Language of Letting Go:

“We don't have to question every occurrence to see how it fits into the Plan. The Plan—the awareness, the insight, the potential for personal growth—will reveal itself to us. Perhaps the lesson is to learn to solve our problems without always knowing their significance. Perhaps the lesson is to trust ourselves to live, and experience, life.”

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