

Crossroads: Episode 21

New Year Decisions and Routines with Bestselling Author Emily P. Freeman

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens, and today I'm joined by author Emily P. Freeman. Emily is the New York Times bestselling author of six books, including *The Next Right Thing: A Simple, Soulful Practice for Making Life Decisions*, and *How to Walk into a Room: The Art of Knowing When to Stay and When to Walk Away*.

Her nationally ranked podcast, The Next Right Thing, has more than 26 million downloads. Emily, welcome. And where are you joining us from?

Emily P. Freeman

Thank you so much for having me, Jo. I am coming from Greensboro, North Carolina, which I often say it's in the Piedmont of North Carolina, but a lot of times people don't know what that means. And so I say, it's not the mountains and it's not the coast. It's right in the middle.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That's right. Well, and for our listeners out there, Emily and I have known each other for a while, and I remember the day I was standing and talking to a next door neighbor who is also in ministry, and she said, "Did you know that Emily, in the next cul-de-sac up is actually Emily P. Freeman, the author?"

I was like, "No, I had no idea." And so that started my dive into your work and then having your voice accompany me. So it's just amazing to have you on here. And I'm so excited to introduce you to all of our listeners out there.

Emily P. Freeman

Thank you.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

All right, so now that we've turned the calendar year to 2025, how do you like to frame your year? You often talk about looking back in order to look ahead. And I'm wondering about what guidance do you have for us as we're making resolutions or goals or setting intentions for the year ahead?

Emily P. Freeman

Well, I love this time of year. It's kind of like my favorite. In fact, I often want it to just go on and on. So rather than try to cram all my reflection into that magical week between Christmas and the New Year, oftentimes I like to stretch that into the whole month of January. So I'll say by January 31st, maybe I maybe, possibly I will have looked back over the final year.

But, you know, it takes a long time to reflect on a life. And I have found for me, I mean, this is a great time to talk about it that I prefer rather than waiting until the end of the year to reflect on my life, is I like to incorporate a daily or weekly rhythmic practice throughout the year in small increments, so that when I come to the end of the year, I can review those daily reflections rather than waiting and being like, okay, it's December, it's January.

What happened last February? And the reason why that's so important is, you know, I talk a lot about discernment and decision making, and I have found the best teacher for future decisions are those decisions we've already made. But they do us no good if we can't remember what they are.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So you talk about setting up these regular discernment practices. Looking back daily, weekly, monthly. How do we get started with that? I confess, I am not a reflector by nature. And it's like pulling teeth to get myself to sit down and reflect. I have your *Next Right Thing* guided journal. I've opened it a couple of times.

Emily P. Freeman

That's good! You've opened it. That's excellent.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I have not written anything.

Emily P. Freeman

No, that's okay. Opening is a start.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So how do we begin?

Emily P. Freeman

Well, I love that you confess that, because you are in very good company. In fact, I hear that question from people all the time. They ask almost exactly what you said, which is, I see the value in reflection, and I want it to be helpful for my future decisions. But I do not come by it naturally. So what can I do?

And first of all, I think the first step toward anything is admitting it. So naming it, that's really important. But secondly, I think there's a lot of power in making small moves. And sometimes when it comes to reflection, we think like, if I can't do it all exactly right, or if I don't have this great habit formed, that's, you know, color coded notebooks.

And I have all these systems, we really like systems, but if we can't do it, then we tend to not do it at all. So I find that I like to introduce a practice of reflection to people by rather than looking back, just look around. And it can be as simple as if you have a journal or if you just have a notes app on your iPhone, you can open up that notes app, put the date at the top and write these words, "These are the days of..."

And then you just make a list and you might think like, "That's not a thing, Emily." But let me tell you what it does. When I write down, you know, today is whatever the date is. And I say, these are the days of the gardenias are still blooming. I had lunch with my mother in law.

These are the days of my son applying for college. And it sounds normal and regular because that's just what you did today. Or that's what's happening today. Or it doesn't even have to be today. It could just be this is the season of. But what can happen is if you write it down and then a month later you look back, or a year later you look back.

On that same day, you realize my life has changed since then, things are not as they were, or some things might be, but some things might not be. And what that does for us is it helps us be aware of our life as we're living it. Because so often times, as we know, life goes quickly. We get a lot of input.

We don't have a lot of regular practice of output, and so things just pile up both in our houses and in our souls. And so when we have these tiny little shifts of just paying

attention to this right now moment, it can be really powerful because it trains that little muscle inside of us, that kind of awareness muscle to notice our lives.

And I think that's really the first step of reflection. I think a lot of times people are afraid to look back because they're afraid of what they'll see. They're afraid they'll uncover regrets or decisions they made that they can't change. And that may be true, which is why I think it's helpful to start with just what's true right now.

What are the gifts of the day? You could call it a gratitude list, but for me, I just like to be like, what's life like now? Because the reality is it will not always be like this. It's an approachable way to start.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That really is. And it also helps, on the flip side, we think that we haven't grown, but we also tend to think that when we're in this tough situation that it's never going to change. And that's one thing we know to be true, is that life always changes. The stream that we stand in is never the same stream today, or in this moment as it is in the next moments. So that's really helpful, looking back to see what has changed.

Emily P. Freeman

And, you know, listen, I have adopted the words of John Dewey, who said that transformation comes not from the experience, but from our reflection upon the experience. And I've heard this talked about sometimes in education that you learn while you're doing a thing, but also when you reflect back and noticing, "Okay, what went well, what went terribly? What might I change the next time?"

And I think that can be true. That's the gift of reflection, is that it can be transformative, not just because we've done a thing, but also because we have cognitively recognized that we have done it. And then we can kind of assimilate, like, who is the person who I am becoming as a result of that thing? And like you said, what we're learning, I remember Oprah used to say like she had that article, "What I know for sure", and maybe she still does that in her magazine, I don't know, but I remember when she did that segment on her show back in the day when she had that 4:00 show that I loved after school.

But she would talk about what are the things I know for sure, and I wanted to try that one day. So I was like, "I'm going to do this every month. What do I know for sure?" And let me tell you what. So that list was very short. One of the things I knew for sure, because when you just try to write a list like, here's what I know, fine, great.

But when you add that for sure part, that's where it gets tricky. And so I sort of springboarded off of Oprah's idea of what I know for sure and changed it to what are the things I'm learning? And it's such a more approachable list, and it's also a kinder list because it's saying, like, "I might not know this, but I'm learning something", and that's a wonderful way to reflect on your life, especially if you're someone who's like, "I'm going to see regret."

Okay, well, what are you learning through that? And that can be maybe another helpful way to start. In reflection.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

You give such a gentle invitation. I know when I moved from Greensboro, North Carolina to Cleveland, Ohio six years ago, I had your voice. And then another friend of ours, Kendra Adachi, "the lazy genius". I had your voices in my head. I would just alternate between podcasts because it was both this sense of home, but then also this sense of, "you can do this, you can take the next right step."

You can do the small things, and you both give frameworks that help us to figure it out within ourselves. So I want to ask, how can you offer your gentle invitation in to give this encouraging voice of God to be with us, rather than listening to the hustle culture that tells us we're a slacker? If we haven't figured out everything by January 8th.

Emily P. Freeman

I mean, what a question, and it's such an important one. And it sounds simple, but I do think we live this out over a lifetime, right? I have found a lot of comfort and peace in the statement that says that... I say to myself, "your pace is your pace and there's no such thing as behind." The word behind is such a relative word.

You're behind as compared to what? I think we adopt that in our productivity culture, we think like, well, yes, we can be late on a deadline. Yes, there are things that we can be "behind" in. But when it comes to our lives, I think a lot of us find ourselves hustling toward something that maybe we can't name because we feel like we are behind where we think we ought to be, or where we thought we would be by now, whatever that is. And so I have found that to be a really gentle, helpful mantra to hold on to. My pace is my pace. There's no such thing as behind. I also have tried to stop kind of saying like, "well, I'm a slow processor" or "I'm a slow reader" or "I'm a whatever slow". And in some ways, you could be like, "yeah, that's who I am."

But I do think there's this slight negative connotation to saying like, "I'm a slow something". I think slow is a beautiful word. I'm kind of re-narrating that in my mind. But I also think, "Slow processor as compared to what?" Who's the perfect processor when it comes to life or living or decision making or whatever it is really?

It's just that we all are... we differently process and some of us process things at a rate where we can make decisions quickly. Others of us do it at a rate where it's we're going to take a little more time. It depends on personality and circumstance and a lot of things. But I think that can apply when it comes to that question of like, how do I not get overtaken with the fast current of daily life?

And that's one way for me. That's kind of one log. And the river that I hold onto is accepting my own pace.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I know, I think I know myself as a slow processor all the time as well, because I'm not an extrovert who processes out loud and I think often introverts say, oh well, because they're able to think quickly and speak immediately. We think that's good and better, but it isn't necessarily the truth.

Here we are in January. It's early January still when this podcast drops, and in two weeks we will inaugurate a new president. And that brings a new beginning. People have a lot of feelings this time around. So what are your thoughts for us? For those of us who live in the United States and are people of faith, to look at this new beginning and make a resolution as citizens.

Emily P. Freeman

What a beautiful question. What a beautiful and important question. And there's a part of me in my most honest moment, speaking of slow processing, that says I'm not sure yet. And maybe there's a gift in that too, that when we are in the midst of processing any type of change, especially one that might seem as big as this, that rushing to fix, solve, or figure something out may not in the end yield the most generative results. And so I do think that finding some fixed points of clarity for ourselves is, for me, a first step.

And I guess I think of that in three parts, when I think of a fixed point, you know, in mathematics there's like something that does not change when things are this. I'm not a math person, but it's something that does not change. On the thermometer, there's fixed points of the boiling point and the freezing point. The north and the south pole.

These points are fixed, but we also know that we live in a very fluid world. Our earth is moving and there are things changing, and we have an impact upon it. But that north and south pole are probably not changing. And so I think that when it comes to our outer lives, things are going to be changing and happening all the time.

Which is why I think that while we cannot ignore interaction with people with whom we may disagree, we cannot ignore having to work together with people who see different solutions to the world's problems. What we can ignore to our detriment, I think, is what's happening on the inside of us. But it's also the thing we have the most agency over.

And so I think, to answer your question, in at least a 25% way, I would say I think we have to know in name what our fixed points are, who are those fixed people in our life with whom we can say any and all of the words and they will not try to fix, change, convince or argue with us about it.

That we can just be all the way ourselves and know they can be too. I think finding those fixed places that we can retreat to, whether they're places within our home, or places, maybe it's a walk for me, it's a walk around the neighborhood. It's not necessarily fixed as in still, but it's fixed as in reliable, that I know I can return there and I can come back to myself and come home to myself and recover and maybe re-regulate from a moment of activation or dysregulation based on what I may have heard in the news or a conversation that I overheard at Starbucks.

And then finally, I think having some fixed prayers, having some borrowed prayers that I can rely on, that I can return to, that are true words that I don't have to maybe think too hard about or make up, but something that I can repeat for myself, or that you might call a mantra. Some call it a prayer, some call it just a motto, something that you can repeat.

I know that Alcoholics Anonymous has a fixed prayer we're all familiar with. "Grant me the serenity." It's the serenity prayer to accept the things I cannot change. So I think those are some things that come to mind. We are collectively as a community of people, headed into a change that half the country is thrilled about, and half the country is devastated by. So how do we find ways to work together to create the kind of world we want to live in? I think it has to start inside of us, so that when those moments come, that where we're tempted to come all the way out of ourselves, that we have some resources to rely on that are fixed.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Right. We often think that we have to do everything all at once, that it's a zero-sum game. Either we do it all right now, or it's never going to get done. And if we don't tackle it head-on, then we're going to miss an opportunity, and it will never come around again. You take a very different approach in talking about arrows.

Can you talk to us a little bit about arrows, and how looking for arrows and using arrows in our own lives might be helpful in these uncertain times?

Emily P. Freeman

Well, it's a decision making concept that some of us are deeply uncomfortable with, because when we have a decision to make or a choice to make, yes, there are those times when it's an on the spot decision where you got to make a call and now's the time to make it. But there are also those situations in our lives where, and maybe this is one of them, when it comes to our civic responsibilities and what's our next right thing to do where we have a little bit more time.

And I think in those situations it can be helpful and generative to ask the question, and rather than rush to an answer of action, if we have the time to wait and listen and pay attention to, maybe it's not a solution, but maybe it's just one next right thing in the direction of good. And that's what I would call an arrow.

An arrow is not necessarily a sign or, you know, like, well, I didn't know what to do. So I looked around and I saw these signs and that would be great. That's not my experience. Maybe not yours either. But I do think that knowing that most, especially bigger decisions with more complex problems that involve a lot of people, usually there's just not a problem and a solution, but instead those decisions, those solutions are going to come through many, many, many small moves in the direction of hope, in the direction of goodness.

And so if we collectively learn to look for those small next right moves, what I call arrows, then I think hopefully I would like to know that we are all in our own ways and together, moving in the direction towards hope without the pressure of thinking like this is a problem, that if we have the problem, we must come up with the solution immediately or we're failing.

Well, what about a small move we can make in that direction? So that's the concept of arrows, and I have found it to be deeply helpful.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And what's beautiful about those small moves is that we can of course, correct at any time. If you are making a giant leap, you might end up in the wrong place. But if you were making the next small move and the next small move, you can keep looking around and discerning and seeing where you're being called.

And it's much easier in those small moments than it is with these big, huge, weighty decisions that feel like they impact everything to make the right decision.

Emily P. Freeman

And I love that you said that because yes, there are those times when it's kind of like, "Make the call now. Ready? Go." But I think those times are more seldom than we think. I think a lot of times we put the urgency on ourselves to make these big decisions in one fell swoop, when most of the time, these bigger decisions, we have some time to discern, to ask co-listeners, people in our lives who are some fixed point people for us that we can go to and seek counsel and advice and to listen and discern what our next right thing might be.

But the reason why we don't often take that time is unmade. Decisions have a lot of power, and they will not leave us alone until we give them an answer. And so what we can do is we could have a false sense of urgency that like, oh no, I'm uncomfortable. I must make the decision even though I don't know what to do.

Even though I'm not exactly sure what the decision is, if you can't put your decision into a sentence, one sentence, it is not time to make the decision yet. And I have found that to be a really helpful practice, because sometimes you can just be like, "Well, I don't know what to do about my kids' schooling." And so I have to just choose something like, what is the actual exact decision that has to be made today?

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I was hoping you'd go there.

Emily P. Freeman

A very small move, but it's not the final decision yet. And is there an arrow I can follow to just do one next right thing? Maybe I need to email a friend who has a kid that goes to that particular school. Maybe I need to just make one move in the direction that I think is right, and see what I can learn.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yeah, it's taking this Goliath sized issue and bringing it down into something that we can hold and examine in our hands and decide for today. It doesn't have to be forever, but decide for today. I love that, and it's so helpful in all decision making processes. I also want to name that in January. A lot of us are just tired.

The sparkle of the holidays is over, and any extra adrenaline that we had to make the holidays happen has run dry. So what invitation do you have for us in the dark, quiet days of winter?

Emily P. Freeman

It's an excellent question because I love the dark, quiet days of winter. When the time changes and it gets dark earlier, I'm always like, "Oh, finally, we all just need to go to bed. Let's just shut it down." But after months of that, that can be tiring on a person. And so I think that we've sort of circled around that already.

But taking our cues from nature is a really beautiful way to live. And I think not trying to force certain rhythms before their due time, allowing winter to teach us what winter has to teach us, which one of the things I've learned often from this darker, maybe somewhat slower season is that just because we can't see the growth or the blooming happening, it doesn't mean that nothing is happening, and that a lot of times I forget to allow the darkness to do what the darkness does best, which is to nourish, to strengthen, to grow, to quiet, to still.

And so giving myself the gift of that at the time may seem again like a very small move. But over time and over the course of a lifetime, entering into the rhythmic practice of that every winter can in turn be a really beautiful gift for me, just to remind myself of my own humanity.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That is so beautiful. With the turning of the calendar, lots of people make New Year's resolutions, but we often find them hard to keep throughout the year. So do you make resolutions? And if you do, what wisdom do you have for those of us who want to set an intention for the coming year?

Emily P. Freeman

Well, two things come to mind. And one is that if making New Year's resolutions is something that sounds dreadful, then I would advise you not to do it. So if anyone feels

like this is something that I'm supposed to do, or everyone on my small community does it, or my partner does it, or whatever the thing is. But for you, it's just not the thing.

Then it's not going to be the thing in February, March or April either. And all it will do is become sort of like a shame, nagging in the back of your mind. So that's the first thing. But if you are someone for whom new beginnings is really exciting, but resolutions just kind of do still tend to fizzle out.

First, I may not be the best person to help someone come up with ways to, like, meet your resolutions no matter what. I do think some people are really good at that. I think like *Atomic Habits* might be a great book to read. To think about like, “How do I, you know, start small and have habits that can build towards a bigger goal?”

But what I think I'm good at is reminding people to come alongside yourself as a friend, that any outside framework is only as helpful and useful to you as much as you are the boss of it, and it's not the boss of you. And so I really love playing with form and finding a way to. The whole purpose of a resolution, right, is to grow.

It's to transform. It's to maybe discover things in yourself that you know are in there, but you want to bring them out, or you want to do something in a way that is more you now that we can work with. And that for me has been found by, I don't necessarily make resolutions, but I do sometimes set very broad, loose kind of goals for the year, like maybe 5 or 6 things that by this time next year I want to be true, making sure that in meeting those, that the process for my meeting those things and those things happening, that I can still do them like a person and not a robot.

And then finally, what kind of overarching all of that is? I'm still one of those, like old school dorks who chooses a word for the year.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I was going to ask if you did star words.

Emily P. Freeman

I do because I think it's so fun. Like, for me that's really fun. But for someone else that's like, “That's so dumb and boring.” Well, don't do it then. But I'll choose a word and sometimes I'll like, have it put on a mug or on a bracelet or something just silly to remind myself of it. And what I'll do is rather than the word being like some type of goal, what I'll do sometimes is I'll take the word at the end of the month.

So let's say you choose a word at the beginning of January. At the end of January, look back in January and say, where did I live into that word? So rather than a looking forward practice, it's sort of like an overarching signal. It's a big signpost, an arrow, if you will, but then it becomes a reflection practice.

Like look how I'm already doing this, look how I'm living into this, and look how this word is inspiring. Some of my decisions that I might have ignored, some of my invitations that I may have automatically said no to. But because my word this year was fun or whatever. Now I'm going to consider it because I have made this word primary in my imagination. So I hope that's helpful when it comes to thinking about New Year's resolutions.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I do have a reflection guide on a word for the year.

Emily P. Freeman

Okay! See, you're doing it.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I know, I'm really good at doing it for other people.

Emily P. Freeman

You need to pull it out and pretend like you're other people. So there you go.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That's exactly what I need to do. We close our episodes by asking our guests about hope, and I feel like this whole episode has been an episode about hope. But I do want to ask if you had any specific words of where can we find hope in this world, or even within ourselves and our relationship with God?

Emily P. Freeman

I have not always been a community person. My personality tends to gravitate toward rooms by myself. Finding quiet time alone. Reflection comes very naturally for me. Maybe that's why I talk about it so much, but where? I have personally found a lot of hope, especially in the last several months, has been in shared community and shared life, in life around the table and shared laughter.

And maybe when I was younger, college days, you know, that came naturally. And so I didn't see the gift of it so much. But now that, you know, we're in midlife and we have growing kids and maybe, you know, even my husband and I sometimes pass like ships in the night. I see now the great gift it is to me to be in community with other people.

And perhaps that's because we have gone long seasons without it. So I think finding hope in the faces of one another, seeing the ways that the image of God is reflected in those people around me, recognizing the imago dei, the image of God in everyone, and encouraging others to do the same. Those are ways that I think hope will never disappoint.

I think we'll always be able to see hope as we look around at the communities that we're with.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

All right, well thank you, Emily.

Emily P. Freeman

Thank you. This has been so fun.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It has. I've really been looking forward to this.

Emily P. Freeman

Oh, good. Me too.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It was such a pleasure to sit down with Emily today, as she shared her wisdom to gently embrace the new year. We'll link to Emily's website in our show notes, and you can find out more about her newest book, *How to Walk into a Room* on her site.

On our next episode, we welcome Marjorie Hunt, the director of the Academy Award winning film *The Stone Masons*, to tell us more about the filmmaking process and what it was like behind the scenes with the stone masons as the Cathedral was being built. Thank you for listening to Crossroads. And until next time, peace be with you.

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