

*the*  
NEXT  
RIGHT  
THING

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A SIMPLE, SOULFUL  
PRACTICE FOR MAKING  
LIFE DECISIONS

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For anyone who's ever made a pro/con list  
in the middle of the night.

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## DO THE NEXT RIGHT THING



*Most of us go through life praying a little,  
planning a little, jockeying for position,  
hoping but never being quite certain of  
anything, and always secretly afraid that  
we will miss the way.*

*A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy**

The admissions building smells like initiative, angst, and Y2K. I stand at the entrance of my college alma mater just a few miles from my house and take a long, deep breath. *What am I even doing?* The question still lingers even though my decision is mostly made. The main desk sits in the center of the building, a large circular piece like a mouth wide open. Approaching the desk, I scan the room for familiar faces, glad when I see none. I'm not ready for a casual, small-talk conversation about why I'm here. The woman inside the eternal desk offers to help, and I tell her I would like a copy of my transcript. She gets to work, and I settle in a bit.

The one question people ask when they find out I am enrolling in grad school is why. It's a normal question, one I would ask you, too, if you told me the same thing. Why are you going back to school? This is the question that has kept me up at night for weeks while I made my decision. *Why would I want to do this? I have a job, a family, a full life already. This will take lots of time and lots of money, and what is the actual point?* It's the question that begged for an answer while I tried to decide what to do next. I didn't have a clear plan with bullet points, a job I wanted to get that required this degree, or even the cultural expectation you have when you decide to go to college the first time because "that's just what you do." At my age, going to school again is not just what you do. As I weighed this decision, I annoyed everyone around me. Or maybe I just annoyed myself. Sometimes it's hard for me to tell the difference.

It's the *mights* and *maybes* of our lives that keep us awake at night. *Maybe I should accept the new position. Which schooling choice is best for my kids? How can I support my aging parents? What might happen if I choose wrong?*

With my school decision, I just wasn't sure if it was right. My husband, John, was all for it, the timing was fine, I was interested in the course work. But what if I decided to do it and then it turned out to be too stressful for our family? Or what if I decided *not* to do it and regretted that decision too?

For months, the possibilities permeated every conversation I had with family and close friends. We all handle the pressure of decision-making differently, and this time I'd lost my way a bit, turning into a hyperfocused version of myself. Listening intently during sermons to see if God had a special message just for me in the words. Looking for deeper meanings in the pithy quotes on Dove chocolate candy wrappers. Googling *decision-making* every which way possible: *how to make a decision in five minutes, what to do when you have a big decision, how to know if you're choosing right.*

It doesn't matter what the specific decision is. Unmade decisions hold power. They pull, they push, they interrupt where they aren't wanted and poke us awake at night. They can turn us into strange versions of ourselves. Like toddlers at our feet right before dinner, they follow us around and refuse to leave us alone until we face them head-on and either pick them up or point them in the right direction. If only we knew what the right direction was.

Maybe that's where you find yourself now. You want to give this decision the attention it deserves, and you're willing to do the work. The only problem is, you don't know what work

is required, and perhaps you don't think you have the time to learn.



When it comes to making decisions, chances are you've probably heard the advice this book is built upon before. The phrase isn't new or even particularly creative. Personally, it's advice I've taken, forgotten, and remembered again. But it's held me up through young motherhood, grief, indecision, frustration, vocational boredom, and spiritual confusion. A version of this advice has been famously quoted by Mother Teresa, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, and Anne Lamott. It's become a common catchphrase for coaches and athletes, in boardrooms and corporate motivational speeches. So, what is that advice? *Do the next right thing.*

The concept is perhaps most famously found in *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*: "We earnestly pray for the right ideal, for guidance in each questionable situation, for sanity, and for the strength to do the right thing."<sup>1</sup>

While we may not all be alcoholics, it's safe to say we all need guidance in each questionable situation, we all need the strength to do the right thing, and, in many ways, we are all addicted to something. There's nothing like an unmade decision to smoke our addictions out.

Maybe you are addicted to clarity and certitude, wanting to be absolutely sure of all the details before moving forward.

Maybe you value approval above all, wanting to seek everyone else's perspective before understanding your own, accounting for a lack of confidence and a chronic case of hesitation.

Maybe you have an aversion to making decisions so you either delegate them, avoid them, or make them too quickly just to get them settled.

Perhaps you're addicted to activity, to hustle, to the fast pace of a well-connected life, and so when a decision needs to be made that could change the course of your future, you don't have the space to consider what might be best, much less what you might actually want to do.

It's estimated that adults make over 35,000 decisions every day. A study at Cornell University revealed that Americans make over two hundred daily decisions on food alone.<sup>2</sup> So many of those decisions are mindless; we aren't actually aware of our choices. Right now chances are high that you have a decision to make. Those 35,000 decisions don't even account for the extra ones that come in the midst of a job loss, marriage proposal, graduation, diagnosis, cross-country move, promotion, argument, pregnancy, or car accident. Every day we have choices to make, priorities to set, goals to meet, and desires to consider.

Doing the next right thing is good advice, but it didn't sink in for me fully until I started noticing it in the Gospels. So often, right after Jesus performed a miracle, he gave a simple next thing to do.

To the leper, he said to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest" (Luke 5:14).

To the paralytic, he said, "Get up, pick up your stretcher, and go home" (v. 24).

To Jairus and his wife, after raising their daughter from the dead, when he had their full and complete attention, and when chances were good he could get them to swear their lives away for his sake, he did not perform a lecture about dedicating

their lives to him or about what grand plans he had for their girl now that she was alive. Instead, he told them to give her something to eat (8:55). After raising their daughter from the actual dead, the one thing Jesus told them in the face of their rapt attention was to go make lunch. At first glance, that seems like a waste of a captive audience.

Rather than a life plan, a clear vision, or a five-year list of goals, the leper, the paralytic, and Jairus and his wife were given clear instructions by Jesus about what to do next—and only *next*. Perhaps he knew something about our addiction to clarity. He knew if we could somehow wrangle a five-year plan out of him, we would take it and be on our merry way.

After Jesus performed miracles, he made the next right thing unmistakably clear. But what about for us? Let's take our cues from Jesus and the recovering alcoholics by considering what it means for us to do the next right thing *now*. Not the next big thing. Not the next impressive thing. Just the next right thing in front of us. So what is our next right thing? It's a question that gets my attention, and it's what I want to explore with you.

This is a book about making decisions. It's also a book about making a life. What a privilege it is to have a choice to make at all. We live in a world where many people don't have the luxury of choice in certain areas, and this book presupposes you are in a position in life where choices are yours to make. We all have a different degree of control over various areas of our lives, depending on our age, our season, our family life, and our degree of privilege because of our race, gender, financial situation—and so on forever. I'll invite you as you read to bring to mind those areas in your life where you do have a choice, no matter how small. Be willing to hold

your choices with an open hand and see them from a different perspective.

Regardless of your own degree of personal choice, you have a God who walks and talks with you, who moves in and through you, who sings over you. How he moves in you may be different from how he moves in me, but one thing is certain. He remains unchanged. As my friend and teacher James Bryan Smith so kindly reminds us, you are one in whom Christ delights and dwells, and you live in the strong and unshakable kingdom of God. The decision is rarely the point. The point is you becoming more fully yourself in the presence of God.



Eventually I made my schooling decision and decided to enroll even though I couldn't articulate exactly why. I talked with my spiritual director about this when I was still in the deciding phase, and she said something I haven't forgotten. "Our Western minds are trained to go down the path of explaining. We think if we can understand it, then we can control it."

It's true, don't you think? We are conditioned to believe the only reason we should do things is if we know why, where we are headed, and for what purpose. No wonder we have trouble making decisions. If we don't have clear answers or sure things, then taking a big step feels like a risk at best and a wasteful mistake at worst.

*If I understand it, then I can control it.*

For me, in this particular decision, this is what I know: I feel a call to the deeper life with Jesus and with people, in my personal life and my ministry life and my business life. I'm not choosing a degree path because I feel like something is

missing but because, finally, I can see the whole. And what my wholeheartedness has been telling me over the past few years is that I want to learn more about spiritual formation, I want to become more fully myself, and I want to do it alongside a community of people who want that too.

At the time of this writing, I still have a few months left until graduation. I'll be forty-two years old. During that period of time when I was trying to make the decision, my focus was on the decision itself, but I also noticed something shifting within me. I felt needy, open, aware, and ready to listen. At every turn, I was eager to hear from God. We know decisions are important because each one carries a consequence. Decisions shape our lives. But what we often overlook is not only how our choices shape outcomes but how they shape us too. They reveal our character and help to create our character.

What if the way we make decisions is equally as important as the decisions we make? What if choice is one of the primary avenues of our spiritual formation? Unmade decisions have the power to either close us up in fear or open us up to love. This is both the burden and the gift of our indecision. We get to choose which one we carry.

What these next chapters will do for you, I hope, if you take action, is create space within your soul and on your schedule for you to remember who you are, where you live, and why it matters. In turn, you'll learn to name the unnamed things within you and discern with God what your next right thing could be. Whether you are in the midst of a major life transition or if you simply suffer from the low-grade anxiety that daily life can sometimes bring, you always have decisions to make, big or small. As long as we live, we'll be making decisions. Like you, I want to make good ones. If you're facing

something and you don't know where to start, maybe doing the next right thing will be a welcome beginning.

In the spirit of following this advice, each chapter will end with a short prayer followed by a simple practice. Some of these practices will invite you to answer a question and enter into a more contemplative posture. Others will be more tangible, like instructions to make a certain kind of list or take a particular action. These practices are meant to help you explore not only what your next right thing might be but also where God is with you in your indecision. If you find that certain practices aren't leading you closer to God, don't do them. The goal is not to finish an activity. The goal is always union with God.

## ○ A PRAYER

*O God, I am open.*

*The decisions I'm facing have become too much.*

*Ease my fatigue with your presence and my hesitation  
with your peace.*

*Here is an issue that has me tied up in knots. Will you  
begin to untangle me?*

*What do you want me to know today?*

*O God, I am open.*

## ○ A PRACTICE: PAY ATTENTION

What is something you're thinking about pursuing, starting, quitting, making, finishing, or embracing? If you don't see the clear path, the end game, or the five-year plan, take heart.

Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Get still.

Stop talking.

Pause the constant questioning of everyone else's opinion.

Now hold that thing, whatever it is, in your mind.

Pay attention to your body and your soul—*Does it rise or does it fall?*