

EPISODE 004: SEASONS OF BUSINESS

BY NANCY RAY

Intro

I recently shared the news that after I finish this year, my 12th year in business, the doors of Nancy Ray Photography, will close. This was one of the hardest, most difficult decisions of my life. I love this work, I am going to miss this work, but the bottom line is this: God gently made it clear to me that this season has come to an end. I don't know where you are today, but I do know that we all have big decisions to make as we navigate seasons of life. It's normal and natural, but it's just not talked about very much. My hope is that as I share how I navigated this huge decision, you will hopefully walk away with some helpful tools for the next time that you step into a new season, too.

You're listening to Work and Play with Nancy Ray, Episode 4.

Much of our daily lives can be divided into two categories. Work and play. Simply put, that is where our life and your legacy take place. This is a podcast all about learning to work and play well, which leads to a healthy soul, and a fulfilling life. Listen in.

Content

Well, today is the day after I announced to the world that I'm closing the doors of my photography business. So naturally I'm feeling really emotional and raw and sad and happy and hopeful-- just a whole lot of things. I know you might be listening to this long after that announcement took place, but it's still really fresh for me today. You also might not know me and you might not be familiar with my work as a photographer and that is totally fine, but I want you to know this: I have spent the last 11 and a half years of my life pouring into this business. Being a photographer and learning to run a business and lead a team has been one of the greatest experiences of my entire life. I went from knowing nothing as a college student and literally just shooting weddings as they came to me for no money or just a few hundred dollars, to now leading a team of wedding and family photographers who have photographed literally hundreds of weddings and families through the years. This was a massive decision for me personally and for my family, and it all started one year ago. Today, it feels like I've turned the page into the next chapter of my life. Now, I'll be honest, I could've kept going. Part of me really, really wanted to just keep going. I was good at it. I was confident in it, but this quote from Richard Blackaby explains why I'm letting it go:

*"Our problem as leaders is we do everything we know to do.
That's not enough. We need to do everything God wants us to do."*

That says it all. I just know that in order for me to do everything that God wants me to do, I need to let this go. I simply know that God wants me to do something different. I'm going to walk you through how I got to this point and how I finally made the decision and how I listen to God's voice every step of the way. I'm going to share some questions, some hard questions, that I had to ask myself and I'm going to ask these questions to you, too. So I'm going to start this episode by asking these questions and hopefully as I share my story, you're going to understand a little bit more about what those questions mean. And as I finish the episode and come back and ask these questions again, maybe you'll have a fuller understanding about where you are today.

So the questions are:

- When is the last time that you have gone back to neutral with God?
- There're natural seasons of life and business: spring, summer, fall and winter. What season are you in right now?
- And finally, are you keeping your spiritual eyes and ears open to listen to what God is saying to you in the details of your life?

One year ago, Will and I went on a marriage retreat and on this retreat it was beautiful. We were in the mountains, God was really speaking to us and it was a retreat all about learning to hear God's voice, which was really cool. But one of the leaders of the retreat simply asked the couples a simple question, when is the last time you've gone back to neutral with the Lord? And at first I was kind of like, what does that mean going back to neutral? I have no idea what you're talking about. He kind of went on to explain, when is the last time that you have just laid all your cards on the table with God? Every area of your life you've just said, "Hey God, I want to hear from you. You're in control. Speak to me in regards to everything."

And as soon as he said those words, tears started welling up in my eyes. You know when a pastor ask a question or you hear a song or you read a book and something kind of hits a nerve, that's what that question did for me. When is the last time I've gone back to neutral with the Lord? And I knew specifically God was speaking to my heart about my business because here's kind of my normal mode of operation: I get a great idea and I love this idea and I've got this entrepreneurial thing in me where I just can't not do something about it. And so I pursue it. I go after it and it turns into something and I go so hard down that road and down in that direction. And then I get so excited. I talk to God about it and I invite him in to my journey and ask him to bless it.

And so far he is so faithful and gracious and he has and he does and he wants to be in on our journey. And a lot of times, I really think that this is a good approach. I think that we don't need to spend our lives sitting, waiting around to hear from God for every little thing. I think often-times God wants us to take a first step and he gives us the freedom to do that. But he also really does want to speak into us. He wants to be the one to lead the way to pave the path. And I think he just wants to be part of our decisions. And so instead of me doing my normal thing of going hard in one direction and asking God to bless my work, I realized I don't know that I've ever gone back to neutral and just said, God, is this where you want me? Is this where you have me? Is this the work I should be doing? Is this the track my family should be on? And so when he asked that question, it was literally like the floodgates just burst forth and I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't

stop, it just that tears kept coming because I knew I had to ask myself the scary question, “Lord, what do you want from my work?” And at this point, I was in my 10th year of business, my team was flourishing. This is just a year ago. Everything was going so well. And the thought of laying this business down terrified me. I didn’t really want to entertain the thought. So it was scary to lay it on the table for the Lord. And thankfully I did not get an answer right then and there. I didn’t know what I should do right then and there.

But that marriage retreat propelled me into a season of seeking God in a new way, in a different way, specifically as it relates to my work. And one important piece of this puzzle that I haven’t mentioned yet is that at the time of this marriage retreat, I found out just... I think a week or two before we went on the retreat, that I was pregnant with our third baby and it was a surprise pregnancy. And I had an eight month old and a two year old at home. And so lots of questioning going on, what... there’s another maternity leave that’s just in my horizon and what does it look like for me to be working long-term and shooting weddings long-term? And so with that in mind, I just knew I had to be asking God, “What do you want from me?”

And so for the next six months after that marriage retreat and after asking myself, “when’s the last time I’ve gone back to neutral with God?” and after truly going back to neutral and lay everything on the table saying, “God, what do you want from my life? Do you want me to be a stay at home mom? Do you want me to keep working? Do you want me to do something new or different? What does this look like?” For six months straight, I prayed about this. I prayed about this specifically. I asked God to speak to me, make it clear. What do you want? And I don’t know that I’ve ever prayed about one topic for such a long amount of time, but here’s what happened over those six months, God started to speak to me.

And I get a lot of questions about how do you know God’s speaking to you? How do you know it’s his voice? What does that look like? And I could probably do another episode all about that and maybe I will sometime. But for me, in the six months, it just looked a lot like me. Keeping my spiritual eyes and ears open to anything related to the topic of work. And so if I would see something or experience something in my life and it resonated with me in some way and I felt like maybe that could apply to me, maybe that applies to this situation, I would go and write it down in my journal. And I actually journaled... I blocked off several pages in my journal, and I put at the top of it my decision within NRP and God speak to me and things like that so that I knew I could flip back in my journal, and every time I heard God’s voice on this, I could always go back to those pages.

I just want to share with you just a few things that I wrote down in those pages during that time. The first thing I wrote down was a text that I got from a friend who is actually a friend on Instagram and I don’t know her, but we have really connected, we’re in similar seasons of life. She texted me and said, “Nancy, I just want you to know I have been so inspired by you after seeing you announce your pregnancy for baby number three, that you still want to keep working and having a family because I feel like a lot of people don’t think that that’s possible and it’s inspiring.” And so that really like fired me up and resonated with me. So I wrote it down, and I wrote down three conversations that I had, three separate conversations, one with my husband, one with my mom, one with my sister.

Those three people are like the three people that I know will always and forever be in my corner. I wrote down specifically things they said in this conversations that pointed directly to this topic. I watched that movie about Mr. Rogers, it's like a documentary. I came home and journaled about that movie because the thing that stood out to me the most is that he lived a life that really changed so many people and so many children and families for the better. And he took TV and used that as a medium for ministry which is super cool. If you haven't seen that documentary, it's really fascinating and really good to watch. But I came home and journaled about that because it left an impression on me. Work can be used for ministry and work can be used for good.

I was reading some books at the time and I wrote down a quote from the book *Lioness Arising* and the quote said, "Strength has given for service, not status." And that resonated with me. I wrote down a quote from *Deep Work* that says, "Deep satisfaction comes from deep work." And then of course Bible verses that would pop up time and time again, "Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work." And that's Colossians 1:9 & 10. And then also Colossians 3:23 "Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men." And this is the equivalent of one page in my journal, but literally I think I filled up five or six pages and after going back and reading through those pages, I came to this conclusion, God is telling me work is good. He's confirming that he's kind of wired me to work and I have this entrepreneurial drive and things for a reason.

And so he really confirmed work and me and so he didn't say anything. There was nothing specifically related to Nancy Ray photography or weddings or my team. Just the overwhelming answer that I got over six months was work is good and keep going. I went with that and I was six months pregnant and it was September and everything pointed just for me to keep working. It might look different, but just to keep pursuing God in that and keep staying strong and faithful in my work. During this time, my husband and I went on a trip to Italy to celebrate 10 years of marriage and photographed my first destination wedding, which was a blast. And all during this time, I got a break from my children. We were there for 10 days. I did two days of work there with this wedding, but really most of it was just a lot of rest and sleep and leisure and hiking and exploring.

It was so fun. But one of the things I did while I was there was take a course, an online course all about podcasting and this lit a fire under me. Again, just that God was like downloading things to me, and I was writing in my journal like crazy and I was more fired up to work and I had every plan to launch this podcast before this baby was born. I was ready to go and just fired up about it. So excited about it. And so after having such a new vigor and excitement for my work, I came home and a curve ball was thrown at me. So I have mentioned that I have a team and it's a small team. I've got two girls that work with me in the studio and a couple of other team members who are contractors and we all meet together.

But one, one of my main girls who had been with me at the time, gosh, it was almost seven years that she had been working alongside me in the studio. She was my right hand girl. She led my business while I was on maternity leave for both of my first two babies. She had been my first hire, my first employee I ever hired, one of my dearest friends, her name's Callie. She approached me and after several conversations just told me, I think my season with Nancy Ray Photography

is over. Now, this was super surprising because I was ready to go. I mean, I was ready to keep working. And what it did was it kind of spun me back into this whole seeking God thing because I was like, what? What's happening? What does this mean? I'm going on maternity leave in six weeks.

So that means I need to hire someone else really quickly in order to help my other girl, Olivia, just run everything really smoothly while I'm gone. They just left me questioning a lot of things. But here's the cool part about this. Callie said in this whole transition, "Nancy, you know, you've been sharing with our team a lot about going back to neutral with God and seeking God in our work. And that has resonated with me so much. So I've taken it to heart and I've been seeking him about my own seasons of life and he's made it clear to me and my husband that it's time for me to step away." Okay. Like who can argue with that? I cried, I hugged her. But to be honest, I felt like what should have been devastating to me because she really helped me run my business, was incredibly life-giving to me. It was so life giving. It was like I cried and I was sad, but she was doing exactly what God wanted her to do. And I felt this lightness. I felt this weight lift. I felt like this is right and it didn't make sense that I should feel that way. And we were still sad, but it was just the adversities and then so her decision and her following God's leading in her life kind of put me right back at the beginning in a way. Like, okay Lord, I know work is good and you want me to work. But what about this whole wedding photography thing? I was feeling like we were good to keep going, but now one of my team members is stepping away, which really reduces the amount of weddings that we'll shoot every year. And I'm about to have a third baby and am I even going to be wanting to shoot a lot of weddings on the weekends with three babies at home? I feel like in my heart I'll probably want to be home and we'll be missing them. So what does that look like?

Fast forward a couple of weeks and Olivia our other wedding photographer and I went on a long beautiful walk and she started asking me some questions (and our whole philosophy and the Nancy Ray photography team is to be honest, to communicate and to be vulnerable. And I believe in leading with vulnerability. I think the best leaders lead with vulnerability and honesty.) and she approached me so humbly and I'll never forget, we stepped outside the studio, we went on a walk just to talk and about 50 feet away from the studio, it started to rain. And we just laughed and were like, we're doing this. We're not going back for umbrellas. We're out here now. We're doing this thing. And we walked in the rain for about 45 minutes talking about all of this.

And she just said, you know, with Callie's decision to step away, how are you feeling? More than anything, I want you to be mom, to be there for your family and to never feel torn, and I know you feel torn sometimes and how are you feeling about the future of this business? And we went back and forth and talked about a lot of topics. And ultimately at the end of the conversation I came to the realization that I have two choices. Either I close this business and close this chapter or I'm all in again and I've got to go back and hire probably two more wedding photographers, train them completely to be wedding photographers, which is about a year to two years investment in pouring into somebody and building up their brand within my brand. And at the end of that conversation, it really had me questioning.

So for the next two and a half months as I was looking towards the birth of my third baby, I was a mess. I'm going to be honest, I was an emotional mess. If you talked to my husband about this

time, I literally was like, I don't know what to do. I thought I knew, I thought that I knew I should keep going. And then Callie's stepped away and I know that that's right. But where does that leave me? What do I do? Am I actually considering closing this thing that I have built for 11 years? All my heart? I can't take it. And who am I without Nancy Ray photography? That's who I am. And it just was so emotional and not to mention I was like eight months pregnant during this time and all the hormones, everything. I wasn't sleeping well and everything was just, it felt so big and so heavy and I'll never forget my husband, he actually talks to business owners who are Christians and CEOs who are Christians and want to build amazing businesses for the Kingdom of God. That's what he does for his work, which is so awesome. But he was going away for a training weekend and part of his training was to be trained to be a spiritual coach to these business owners. And I was like, yes. I was like, "Babe, when you come back from this training, I am going to be your first person. I'm going to be the one, you're going to practice all these questions on me, you be my spiritual coach. You'll lead me." I was of course saying it all and we were laughing. I was like, but seriously, this isn't like a how to grow my business, I don't need training on how to get more weddings or how to sell more. I need spiritual training here. I need a coach to help me navigate this life decision and where I should be going with my work.

So he came back from that weekend and we planned a date night and we ate dinner and had a lovely time. And we went to Starbucks afterwards 'cause we still had an extra 45 minutes with the babysitter. And we were like, okay, for sure. Let's go to Starbucks, let's talk. So we get our coffee, we sit down. And I said, "Okay, lay it on me. What do you got?" And he kind of smiled and was like, "Well, I really did enjoy the training this weekend, but the most pressing part about the whole training was how he talked about seasons and how the seasons that we see in nature and in this world were created by God." But they're also a reflection of a lot of things seasonally in our lives. So I just want to ask you a couple of questions and I was like, "Okay, cool. I'm game. What are they?" And he said, "As you look back at Nancy Ray Photography, what season do you think you're in right now?"

I was kind of like, "What do you mean?" He said, "If spring is the time of beginnings and opportunities and anticipation for the future and something new and that excitement and planting a lot of seeds, and summer is a time of labor and hard work and just getting after it and building and sweating and making sure you're setting everything up for the best harvest. Then of course, harvest is the fall of reaping of all of your efforts. And winter is when everything kind of draws to a close and you kind of get rest. What season you think you're in?"

And I looked at him with tears in my eyes because I just, I knew that we were in fall heading towards winter. And he looked back at me and he had tears in his eyes and he said, "Babe, when I was at this conference, I listened to these words and I knew in my spirit that we are in fall and we're heading to winter." And y'all, he's built this business with me. I mean it's just as much his as it is mine. He has been my second shooter for countless weddings in the early years before I built a team. And he has been our advisor and our business coach. And he runs all the financials of the business. He is part owner, he is in this thing. And so for God to speak to his heart at that training, the exact phrase, the exact thing that came out of my mouth when he came back and asked me those questions that we're in fall heading towards winter, we both sat in Starbucks and just cried.

And so it was almost a year. I mean, it was at that point, I guess it was eight months of me seeking God and asking God to direct my steps and answer me. And that I'd do whatever he'd ask of me, even if it was hard. And then he said, "Do work." And then Callie left. And then it caused me to really just re-examine everything. And then my husband asks me this question and both of us having such unity on this and both of us just crying our eyes out because it just struck a nerve in our spirit. Like this is it, this is it, and so I would say it wasn't very clear to me for months and months and months. It wasn't clear until that moment. And in that moment a flood of, oh, all kinds of emotions, heartache and grief and relief flooded my heart.

And I knew that this was it. And so then we started talking over the next few weeks, like, how are we going to tell the team? What are we going to do? What is this going to look like? How am I actually going to do this? We have brides that are asking me to shoot their weddings a year, two years from now, how are we going to do this? And we decided to tell our team at the end of the year, it was just before I was going on maternity leave. We had a big planning meeting at the end of November. I was due December 10th and at this planning meeting we were actually planning for all of the following year. It was our big annual planning meeting. Before the meeting started, I remember stepping into our garage just for a second and just saying like, God, is this it? Do you really want me to tell it to everybody? Do you really want me to say this today? Because I'll do it. But I just don't know if I can.

So I went back in and I just knew I had a peace that I had to do it. And so early in the meeting, I simply told the story of our conversation and I said, "You know what? When I was building this business, it was spring. I was hungry. I was full on planting seeds, building relationships. I gave it everything I had. I just was so hungry and as I moved into summer, I feel like that was the season of my business where I really wanted to set my business up for success and I wanted to delegate and I wanted to grow and I hired my team and I trained people and loved training people and growing my team. And then for the last year or two, we've kind of been on autopilot and just the leads have kept coming in. We haven't been lacking for work. It's been so incredibly fruitful. It's been amazing to see and we've enjoyed it so much and we're still in that. We're still in that. We have such a great lineup of weddings booked for this year and families for this year. We're so excited to do that and to serve them well. But I told the team, as I look forward, I think we're just heading to winter. I think it just makes sense for me to bring this to a close at this point."

And we all were crying. I mean, literally, I went in there and got rolls of toilet paper from the bathroom. We were all crying and we had just hired Sammy and man, she was a trooper. It was literally, I think her first day of work and we just like laid all of this out there and we were a blubbering mess. And I was like, welcome to the team, Sammy, I hope you come back tomorrow. We were laughing about that, but she was moved to tears and we all were, I mean, we just knew that this was something that God was a part of and we all had incredible peace about it. And I said, we're going to make a plan for this year knowing this is our last year, and we're going to keep this news quiet. And I want each of us to keep praying about this while I'm on maternity leave. So we can really lay a healthy plan in place for this. And if God continues to confirm it, then we're going to move forward with it. And we'll make this our last and greatest year ever. Because as Will was talking and sharing some things that he learned on his training that we can!

One of the things that he said to me is when you draw something past its time, when you draw something passed its season, it's probably one of the ugliest things. You can't take something and force it to be fall forever. We're just not made to do that. If you keep forcing a season past its season when it should be heading into winter or for that reason, you can't stay at spring time all the time. You have to move on to summer and you have to move on to harvest that at different points and just don't stretch a season past its time because when you do that, we're trying to control the natural seasons of life and seasons of business and seasons of family and work and whatever. You can fill in the blank in your own life, but it's ugly when we try to force it into something it's not. And so we just agreed this is the natural season for us and we were all in unison about it and we all cried and they all thanked me so much for my vulnerable leadership in this. And I tried to blame it on the pregnancy hormones, but I said, "You know what, even though I am pregnant, I really think I would be crying just as hard if I wasn't like this means that much to me." And another thing that Will shared with me was the story of this guy who knew that he was heading into winter with his job. And someone approached him and said, "Hey, are you going to just kind of wind things down now? How are you feeling? Are you done?" He was like, "Are you kidding? I'm not going to wind things down. This is my last year. I'm going to grab all the fruit that I can on my way out." And that was such a beautiful illustration that when God reveals that it is coming down to an end. For some of us it's a gift because we don't have to kind of quietly phase out because of burnout because we've extended it past our season, but we can actually flourish in the harvest. And so that's been our mantra as a team is this year we are going to try to make it our most fruitful year ever and we are going to grab all the fruit on the way out. We are going to try to seize every opportunity that's given to us and make it our best year yet.

So this is all still super fresh for me and I'm still in the process of mourning and grieving this loss if I'm honest. This has been such a big part of my life and that's okay. So I want to speak to anybody who might be listening that is in winter and encourage you to just let winter be. And I think that's a hard lesson I'm learning right now as I'm grieving this loss as I have made this public announcement as I am... I mean really, I'm mourning the loss of something that has meant so much to me for over a third of my life. That's a big deal. I've learned that I can't rush into spring yet. I can't force spring too early. I have to just let winter be, I have to rest. I have to let winter do the good work. Just like in nature when we look outside, it seems that everything's dead, but there's life under the soil. There's rest that's happening. You have to let the grounds lie fallow for a little bit so they can rest and then produce a better harvest and so winter is one of the harder seasons, but it's just as important as the other three. I love this quote from Richard Blackaby who wrote a book called *The Seasons of God*, which is totally on my list of things to read. Now that I'm walking through this, I haven't read the whole book yet, but this quote really stood out to me as I was skimming through it this morning.

"Winter is a season of winding down, withdrawal, retreat and closure. Activities, responsibilities and relationships draw to a close in winter. This is a time of endings but it's also a period of rest, restoration and reflection. It can be a time of solitude before you enter your next spring. You must first navigate winter. However, once winter passes, another spring is at the doorstep."

And I hope that is an encouragement to you today. So I'm going to ask those three questions again:

- When is the last time you have gone back to neutral with God?
- There're natural seasons of life and business. Spring, summer, fall and winter. What season are you in right now?
- Are you keeping your spiritual ears and eyes open to listen to what God is saying to you and the details of your life?

I'd love to close this episode with one of my favorite passages of scripture from Ecclesiastes three:

“For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away, a time to tear and a time to sow, a time to keep silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. He has made everything beautiful in its time. “

Thanks for listening to Episode 4 of Work and Play with Nancy Ray.

As always, you can find me at nancyray.com or follow me @nancyray on Instagram or Facebook almost daily.

My prayer for you today is that you would honestly look at your life and identify the season that you're in, and as you look and listen to the Holy Spirit for guidance that he would make the answers that you need abundantly clear. I hope you'll join me in the next episode as I unpack something that's been incredibly helpful for me in all of this: the difference between our calling and our assignment. I hope to see you then.

