

## TRANSCRIPT FOR PODCAST EPISODE 118-DO SOMETHING YOU'RE BAD AT

I'm Jill Baughan, and you're listening to the podcast called Find Joy...No Matter What.

This is Episode 118.

If you're in a tough place right now, your joy may seem like it's hiding--or gone.

I understand. But it's still there, I promise, just waiting to be resurrected. And this podcast is designed to help you do just that...no matter what else is going on in your life.

For just a few minutes each week, I'll tell you a story--one that just might inspire a way to uncover a piece of joy you might be looking for. Then, we'll consider how it might speak to your life, because even though you'll hear quite a few of my stories during our time together, I believe you'll find your own in every one of mine.

Finally, I'll offer a benediction to send you into your day--or into your night.

So. If you're up for doing joy shots with a friend today...have a listen.

Have you ever wanted to try to do a something, but never did because you were afraid you'd be really bad at it? (I'm talking to you, perfectionists.)

Well, let me introduce you to someone who didn't let incompetence stop her. Her story is almost unbelievable, but totally true, I promise.

Olivia Waxman, writing for *Time* magazine, said: *It sounds like a farce: [Florence Foster Jenkins was an] eponymous socialite, a woman whose singing voice is so bad it's good. But Jenkins was a real person—and if she were alive today, she'd probably be going viral on YouTube.*

Jenkins became somewhat of a musical cult figure of the 1920s, 30s and 40s, probably because of her musical incompetence. Ira Siff said, *Jenkins was exquisitely bad, so bad that it added up to quite a good evening of theater ... She would stray from the original music, and do insightful and instinctual things with her voice, but in a terribly distorted way. There was no end to the horribleness ...*

They say Cole Porter had to bang his cane into his foot in order not to laugh out loud when she sang. She was that bad. Nevertheless, Porter rarely missed a recital. Apparently, it all made for an entertaining time.

She was born in 1868 into a wealthy family in Wilkes-Barre, Penn.; her father was a lawyer and a member of the state legislature. When her parents died, she inherited enough money to take voice lessons, put out five recordings and host an annual

concert at the Ritz-Carlton in New York City throughout the 1930s and 40s, as well as other performances in Newport, R.I.; Washington, D.C.; and Boston, according to the [\*American National Biography\*](#). Founding a Verdi club helped her grow an audience, as did the work of her manager and longtime partner, the actor St. Clair Bayfield. ...She hosted recitals at her home in New York City's Seymour hotel, where she is said to have also kept guests entertained with a bathtub of potato salad and a collection of dining room chairs that she claimed a number of famous Americans had died sitting in.

Her costumes were over the top, often involving wings, tinsel and flowers. And TIME's reviews of her performance were just as colorful and uninhibited as the singer herself. As TIME described her 1934 concert at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel:

*Mrs. Jenkins appeared in flame-colored velvet, with yellow ringlets piled high on her head.*

*The audience, as Mrs. Jenkins' audiences invariably do, behaved very badly. In the back of the hall men and women in full evening dress made no attempt to control their laughter. Dignified gentlemen sat with handkerchiefs stuffed in their mouths and tears of mirth streaming down their cheeks. But Mrs. Jenkins went bravely on. For a Spanish group she wore a mantilla, carried a big feather fan, undertook a few little dancing steps to convey more spirit. While she was getting her breath, cameramen photographed the happy laughing faces in the audience.*

So much ridicule.

Yet, in October 1944, at age 76, she made it to Carnegie Hall. And though it was a self-financed venture, it sold out in two hours. Alison Kinney writes that *she sang "Clavelitos," crying "Olé!" and flinging carnations at the audience in Carnegie Hall. For her encore, she had the carnations collected—and then pelted the crowd again. "Olé!" they roared back. Her friends cheered, hoping to drown out the screams of hilarity and derision.*

The concert, according to TIME, *left dignified gentlemen with tears of mirth streaming down their cheeks.*

Five days after that Carnegie Hall concert, Florence Jenkins suffered a heart attack while she was shopping in a music store. She passed away a month later.

The movie of her life, starring Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant, by the way, is definitely worth a watch.

But I had questions when I learned about this colorful lady and her crazy story. Maybe you do, too.

So did she not know that people were ridiculing her? If she did, didn't it at least embarrass her? And if not, how could she not know?

The jury's still kind of out on this question. Nerve damage due to syphilis (which she contracted at 18 from the husband she divorced) and its treatment may account for some of her cluelessness.

But also, music was her passion, even her life. And you have to admire someone who pursues that passion for joy's sake, no matter what. I personally think she had to know, at least on some level that folks were laughing at her. Reviews of previous performances were relatively gentle (probably written by friends and supporters), but the reviews of her Carnegie Hall performance were brutal.

But she didn't let the ridicule keep her from doing what she loved, even though she did it--let's be honest--really badly. I've included some film footage in the show notes if you'd like to listen and decide for yourself.

But all musical evaluations aside, we could take a cue from Florence.

Because pursuing something just for delight, just because you want to, even if you're terrible at it is one pathway to joy.

Like my husband, who tried to play a golf game at the beach one summer. He and three other guys--none of whom were really *any* good at golfing--walked through the door at the end of the day, their faces hurting from laughing so much because they were *all* so terrible. They spent the entire afternoon whacking around at balls and letting everybody they encountered play through, while they lurched around, half doubled over, making fun of each other. And Ben said he'd never had so much fun on a golf course.

Like the ten-year stretch in my life when I went skiing once a year, and never really graduated past Bunny Slopes.

Like the time not long ago we went bowling with our friends at a rather fancified boutique bowling alley. We were all bumbling bowlers, but ask us if we cared.

So what about you? Is there something you'd like to do just for fun, but you hesitate because, you say, "Oh, I wouldn't be any good at it"?

You want to paint? Sing karaoke? Hunt? Take dance lessons? Something--anything--else?

If so, here's some encouragement for you from author Kate Bowler:

*You can find incredible peace and joy and when you discover you are doing something for no reason at all...just trying feels so good. When the stakes are low, you can return to the beautiful stupidity of caring...Bake the cookies your great aunt used to make...even if they don't turn out perfectly. Read a poem out loud with a fake Swedish accent. Take up whittling or learn to cross-stitch an inappropriate saying onto a pillow.*

*Remember: we're not aiming for perfect. We're just trying to remember to ask ourselves: How does it feel to try?*

And so, my friend,

May you live the words of Florence Foster Jenkins when she said, "People may say I *couldn't* sing, but no one can ever say I *didn't* sing."

And then may you receive this blessing from Kate Bowler as you venture into imperfect territory:

*Blessed are you when life has handed you yet another serious mess. Instead of turning straight to worry or despair or fear or dread, you set it down for a minute and say, "I'll get to that later. I've got something ridiculous to do. And it's urgent." Blessed are you who do something you've never tried that must be done right now, because failing doesn't matter. You know that it feels so good to try.*

*Blessed are we, the responsible, who take a nonlinear path. Who, as the poet Wendell Berry says, "every day do something that won't compute." Who know that right when life gets heavy or hard or too much, we must carve a path to delight. Who do something for no reason whatsoever but for joy.*

Thanks so much for joining me.

If you know people who might be wanting to try, but won't, I invite you to share this podcast with them, and subscribe yourself on iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Or you can go to my website at [jillbaughan.com](http://jillbaughan.com), click on a podcast episode and sign up to receive episodes in your inbox. Just don't miss a single one, because I so look forward to being with you again soon.

Do something you're bad at, my friend. And always, always remember, if you go looking for joy, you'll most likely find it.

Till next time...