TRANSCRIPT FOR PODCAST EPISODE 213: BE A BEATITUDE

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

This is Episode 213.

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.

Well, if you're listening when this episode drops, it's almost Valentine's Day.

Which may make you giddy with anticipation. Or maybe it just makes you roll your eyes and mutter under your breath something about Hallmark holidays and pressure to give gifts too soon after Christmas. Or maybe you don't care to be reminded of your lack of a love interest right now. Or maybe you had an unfortunate experience with the holiday in the past, and you can't wait for the whole thing to be over.

Teacher Melanie McCabe was right there with you once, but she found a way to turn the tables of Valentine trauma into a treat for the soul. She says this:

As a child, I had a humiliating experience on Valentine's Day. Now that I'm a teacher, students celebrate the day with love.

"I'm going to tell you a story," I tell my class of high school seniors.

All eyes look up. Nothing quiets a chatty group of teenagers faster and causes them to put down their phones more effectively than the promise of a story.

"It's a tale about love. And heartbreak." I pause for dramatic effect. "And humiliation."

Their eyes widen. I add the clincher. "Mine." Now I have them.

This is a story I've told every February since I started teaching in 1999. Its power lies, I think, in how it changes the way my students see me. Gone temporarily is whatever omnipotence I

command as their teacher. Left behind is an 11-year-old girl whose feelings are crushed—and each of them is outraged by the brutality of the one who did the crushing.

"In sixth grade," I begin, "I fell madly in love. His name was David. He was a tall, cute, kind of a bad boy—which I found tantalizing. He had no interest in me at all, but I doodled his name all over my diary writing DT loves MM in giant hearts. You get the idea."

They get the idea. The girls are laughing—and remembering.

"So it was Valentine's Day, elementary school style. Construction paper mailboxes. Someone's mom brought in cupcakes. Our parents bought us those variety-pack valentines to send to everyone in class. Dreadful things with corny sayings like 'Bee My Honey' and 'I Gopher You!'"

All of them are laughing now. "It was party day. I spilled my cards onto my desk, and amid many small envelopes, I saw one enormous one, spangled with glitter. My mind raced: 'Wow—someone likes me enough to buy me this giant Valentine. Who could it be from?' With trembling hands, I tore open the envelope and drew out a sparkly image of a queen seated on her throne. The heading read, 'To a Queen of a Valentine.'"

I give the class a meaningful look. "I was swooning with excitement. Slowly, I turned the Valentine over, and at the bottom I saw the signature and almost fainted: David. It was all too perfect to be real.

"Then my eyes traveled up to the writing above his signature. In large, uneven letters, he had written me a special message."

My students lean in, waiting. You could hear a pin drop.

"It read, 'To the Ugliest Girl in Our Class.'"

There are audible gasps. Mouths drop open. Some look down at their desks, seemingly embarrassed for me.

"What did you do?" asks a brave soul.

"What do you think?" I say. "My eyes filled with tears. My nose was stinging, my cheeks burning. I was devastated—and so afraid that he and his friends were watching me, eager to see how I would react."

They nod sympathetically.

"Well, it ruined Valentine's Day for me. It shook what little faith I had in myself for a long time after. But I survived. And now I refuse to cede this holiday of love to the meanness of one rotten boy. Instead, it's given me the motivation to undo the malice of David." I smile.

"And that's why we're going to have a party. A party that celebrates kindness instead of cruelty."

Their eyes light up. They are willing to let me take them wherever I am going. I hand out construction paper so they can make mailboxes.

"You don't have to, but you're welcome to decorate them. I have markers." A few studiously cool boys refuse to do more than scribble their names, but most students cover theirs with hearts, swirls, and fancy lettering. I can attest that no one has more fun in school than an 18-year-old given permission to be ten again.

The night before the party, I cut pink paper into hundreds and hundreds of small squares.

"What are we supposed to write?" someone asks when I distribute them. "Do we have to sign our names?" asks another.

"Of course, you sign your names," I say. "You're not going to write anything you're ashamed of, right? The objective is to write something positive and sincere to everyone in the class. Even if it's someone you barely know, there's always something nice to say. Admire their fashion sense or their skill at basketball. Remind them of something fun you remember about them from grade school."

Looking on as they compose each message is always a treat. I play a mix CD of oldies and Motown love songs, and the vibe in the room is happy. Feet tap. Sometimes I can't stop myself from dancing. But the real fun comes when they read what people wrote to them. Watching a shy kid tentatively open a card and then break into a big grin is worth all of the hassle.

A decade ago, one of my students, Julio, confessed to a girl named Rosa that he'd loved her since third grade. For months after that, they were a hand-holding, starry-eyed pair. But romances are rare, and not what matters to me. There are far better measures of success. Three years ago, a boy named Hal wrote me that I was the only one who had noticed when he was depressed a few months before and how much it had meant to him. Former students have shared with me that they have hung onto their valentines and sometimes read through them when they're feeling low. Parents have e-mailed to tell me that the valentine exchange boosted their child's self-confidence at a time when it was greatly needed. An especially sweet class had an artistic student draw me a Valentine of a queen with the caption "To the Prettiest Girl in the Room," and everyone signed it. That one still hangs next to my desk.

After 20 years of teaching, I harbour few hopes that students will retain all of the grammar or vocabulary I taught them. Maybe they will remember a book or two with some pleasure, or a fun and creative writing assignment. But if all a student recalls of one of my classes are the Valentines they received one long-ago February, to me that makes it all worthwhile.

In recent years, the world that we inhabit has grown uglier—more divisive and unkind. Today there are bullies we contend with via social media who are far more powerful and corrosive than the childhood villain I remember so vividly.

Add to that the high-stakes push to achieve, to earn A's, to get into a top college that dominates the lives of my current students, and they are left saddled with a level of stress far greater than anything I experienced decades ago. If, for one day a year, I can help them turn all of that off, if I can create an environment where they are intentionally kind to one another, then I count that as something to be proud of.

And whatever hurt David intended for me all those years ago, it has now been canceled out, many times over. I think he would be startled by his legacy.

I'm guessing we all know someone who is spending this Valentine's Day hurting in one way or another, someone who very much needs some grace, some kindness, some delight, some joy, some reassurance in this unkind world.

If so, the words of Nadia Bolz Weber inspired by the life and words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount might help us here.

Maybe, she says, *the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus' lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside who his world—like ours—didn't seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.*

Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn't otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards. I mean, come on, doesn't that just sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?

So, she says, *I imagine Him standing among us offering some new beatitudes:*

***(Soft unmetered acoustic guitar ? music* eases in.)**

Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.

Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.

Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."

Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and special-ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are the kindhearted football players and the fundraising trophy wives.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us all because I believe that is our Lord's nature. Because, after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited. Instead, he came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn. As if to say, "You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability." This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and

forgave those who hung him on a cross. Because he was God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.

And so, my friends,

Today, if you know or even just encounter those who don't ordinarily receive blessing,

May you find a way to turn your own pain into compassion…and be a Beatitude for them.

And may God bless you.

Thanks so much for joining me.

If you know people who are feeling unblessed today, 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, 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.

Be a Beatitude, my friends. And always, always remember, if you go looking for joy, you'll most likely find it.

Till next time...

NOTES:

Bolz Weber, Nadia. *Blessed Are the Agnostics*. The Corners, January 13, 2020. https://thecorners.substack.com/p/blessed-are-the-agnostics

McCabe, Melanie. *I Was Bullied on Valentine's Day as a Kid. Here's How I Spread Kindness as a Teacher Now.* Reader's Digest Canada, https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/teacher-bullied-valentines-day/

Matt. 5, 6, 7 (Sermon on the Mount)