

Follow Your Heart

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For years, I've wanted to be on public radio. As a kid, we used to hear the voices of Garrison Keillor and Ira Glass and even Carl Kasell, while our parents drove us around in the stationwagon. As I grew older, I came to respect radio as a particularly unique medium for explaining things to people; a skill, like writing, that I wished to develop.

I've had a few desultory attempts, but I finally had a good excuse to get my act together. Public broadcasting people are sponsoring a [Public Radio Talent Quest](#) and I've decided to submit an entry. My idea was to make a radio show about science that matters.

[Here's my first attempt.](#) (You can listen and vote for me on the contest's website.)

For those who don't love the magic of radio, a transcript follows:

It's 1958 and you're sitting on a table with your shirt off. You signed up for an experiment on vitamins improving vision and now someone's plunging a needle into your arm. Ow! Since when do vitamins require needles anyway?

[music: Waltz (Better Than Fine) - Fiona Apple]

Now the man is gone and you're waiting for the experiment to start. There's another kid here too. You both look pretty bored. Then the other kid starts goofing off. Doodling, making paper airplanes, that sort of thing. And then you feel it.

[TAP tap tap...]

Your hands begin to shake. Your heart starts to pound. Your face begins to feel flushed.

[...tap tap TAP.]

Boy, goofing off sure looks like fun. So you join in.

So that shot in your arm? The thing is, it's actually adrenaline. Hand-shaking, heart-pounding, face-flushing adrenaline.

Half the kids in the experiment were told the shot might make their hearts race. And those kids? They sat quietly, even while the other

kid in the room with them goofed off. But the rest? The ones, like you, who weren't told? They joined right in.

One kid started throwing wads of paper at passersby. Another grabbed a piece of equipment off the wall and used it as a hula-hoop. They just felt so *good*, they later explained.

We think of our feelings as unerring: follow your heart, do what makes you happy — that sort of thing. But what the adrenaline experiment showed is that it's not so simple. Feelings don't come with nice, clean explanations. Our brain makes a guess. And sometimes it guesses wrong.

We're not the slaves of our emotions. For the kids in the experiment, just knowing *why* they were feeling a certain way was enough to change their response.

Following your heart can be fun. But it's also nice to know that you don't have to.