

# Why Flylady is great for actors

By Karen Kohlhaas

Article from [www.monologueaudition.com](http://www.monologueaudition.com)

*This article was revised in August 2006*

In the fall of 2002, Meret Oppenheim, a mother of two teenagers and graduate of our two-year program at the Atlantic Acting School here in New York, told me about a website that was changing her life. She said something like: "I think you'll like this. It seems to be about housecleaning but it's much more than that. I'm taking care of my daily life in ways I've never done before and I can't believe it." So I checked it out: [Flylady.net](http://Flylady.net). And yes, at first the site very much seems to be about housecleaning. Meret had also said not to be distracted by the fact that [Flylady.net](http://Flylady.net) seems to be aimed mostly at stay-at-home and working mothers with houses as opposed to apartments. And yes, most Flylady members from what I could tell did seem to lead quite a different life than most of us New York theater types.

I surely did need some tips about keeping my home and life more orderly, so I signed up for the free membership. I immediately began to receive many e:mails from [Flylady.net](http://Flylady.net) per day (if you think this would put you off, keep reading), most of them reminders to do various things like put on my shoes, locate my laundry, and shine my sink (!). There was usually a daily essay from Flylady and several testimonials by Flylady members.

I was directing a show at the time, so at first I didn't do any of the system consciously. As the introductory e:mail instructed, I just deleted the mails I couldn't get to (the reminders mails are not even meant to be opened – you just read the subject line and then delete). I grew to look forward to the essays and testimonials because they were so positive and helped me to de-stress. It was often very moving to read about people transforming their home lives from absolute chaos to never-before-experienced peacefulness and order. I read about people who were actually getting to live their lives for the first time.

When I do a show my home usually becomes an absolute mess: I eat take-out most of the time and can't find anything in my apartment. What I was astonished to find was that just by reading these personal stories and essays, a little of the Flylady frame of mind took over and for the first time EVER my apartment was quite orderly during the whole production period – even to the point of being able to comfortably have neighbors in unexpectedly late at night. I didn't even feel it happening. But enough about me and my apartment – this is not why I am writing this article.

Flylady's principles can work brilliantly for artists of all kinds because they are about handling unstructured time. Every professional or aspiring-to-be-

professional actor must learn to deal with periods of great activity and structure, and periods where the only one making you get up out of bed is you. Flylady's principles are very simple, and can be your life raft as an actor. Here are some:

- Have simple (SIMPLE!) morning and evening routines (to care for your home life, your body, your finances, your career) that you do every day
- Take BABY STEPS in building routines. Read Flylady's essays on the site about how important this is – when she was building her routines, she only took on one new thing a month so it would have time to become an automatic habit
- Break up tasks into 15-minute increments USING A TIMER. This works so incredibly well you won't believe it – use for learning lines, sending out a manageable number of headshots, doing voice work, making a dent in the script you are currently reading, and making phone calls. When the timer rings you MUST switch to something else. You can come back to what you're doing, but you must switch. This is so powerful for stopping the tendency to burn out, or to get sucked into spending hours on things that don't really matter. And it is REMARKABLE what can get done in 15 minutes. Doing things 15 minutes at a time helps dismantle "all or nothing" syndrome where you don't even start because you know you're in for hours of toil. I recently recommended using a timer to a swamped set designer friend and he was thrilled with the results.
- Take frequent breaks
- Declutter your life a bit at a time
- Get enough rest
- Be good to yourself and put yourself first so that you can be of some use to others
- You can do this: no whining allowed. People have used Flylady's system who are so ill or weak that they can only do 1, 2, or 5 minutes at a time. The testimonials really help send this message.

Underlying her brilliant system is Flylady's definition of a syndrome that I have not seen discussed at length, or in quite this way, in any psychology or self-help book. And it is a phenomenon that is equally the enemy of stay-at-home mothers and cutting-edge artists\*: Perfectionism. I believe that I read in one of Flylady's e:mails the statement "Perfectionism is a state of perpetual victimization."  
(\*Note: stay-at-home mother and cutting-edge artist are not mutually exclusive job titles!)

Since working with the Flylady system I ask actors in my classes if they think they are perfectionists. The statistics are always the same: about 75% answer yes. Then I ask if they are hard on themselves when it comes to their acting, and usually 100% answer yes. To those who said they were not perfectionist, but are hard on themselves, I say, “You are such perfectionists that you don’t even think you have the right to call yourself one! If you are hard on yourself then you are a perfectionist.”

Can you see how ridiculous it is to try to give a perfect performance – or audition? The exciting thing about performing is that we KNOW that it is not going to be perfect. And if somehow we could always do it perfectly, it would be boring and no one would act or go to the theater.

Perfectionism is held as a virtue by many: they think it means having high standards. Actually, the two are completely different: having high standards is great because it is how people, including artists, have achieved the most beautiful works imaginable. But having high standards is not perfectionism. Having high standards and knowing how to work well with yourself can lead to amazing breakthroughs and experiences. Watching someone motivate themselves with perfectionism is like watching someone mutilating themselves – they’ll never win, because they keep setting the bar higher and higher, and beating themselves up when they fail to reach it.

Also, we are in a field that trades on impossible standards: one seemingly cannot be thin/beautiful/hip/connected enough, and some days the party always seems to be happening somewhere else. So much of what currently is on television feeds on our society’s perfectionism – like reality shows about getting plastic surgery, or the many shows about the rich and famous.

Actors do need to consider their appearance as part of their approach to their work, and I think the absolute best thing an actor can do for herself is to find healthy, supportive ways to keep herself in great shape and in high energy and spirits. But unfortunately, the issue of considering appearance kicks off perfectionism in many. If you are perfectionistic about your appearance or your work in any way, can you consider that:

- No energy put into trying to meet impossible physical standards makes anyone a better actor
- The people doing the really interesting work and having the success are often the ones who set their own standards for what they want, embrace themselves as they are, and often have succeeded BECAUSE of their “imperfections” (also known as charisma or endearing qualities)

- Perfectionism is the reason you don't take risks, you don't really go for it, and you beat yourself up after auditions. You know that your audition will fall short of your impossible standards so you don't even go!
- It is not fun at all to watch people inflicting their own perfectionism on themselves
- 

If you could stop beating yourself up, you might free up a lot of time and energy and enjoy being an actor much, much more

Flylady short-circuits perfectionism with the routines (which get so automatic that you do them without thinking, and magically, you are set up for the next day); with awareness (her own personal essays often talk about the monster of perfectionism and how it is constantly trying to creep in and spoil our fun); and with the welcome and soothing phrases: "you're not behind, you can jump in where you are" and "housework imperfectly done still blesses your family."

Now, if you do want to use Flylady's principles to build your own routines to support your career, be warned: you're going to have to give up some drama. The drama of staying up until 3am doing something pointless and ruining the next day; the drama of rushing late to the audition; the drama of constantly planning and failing to do everything "right" all at once. We are drama addicts already, that's why we do what we do! But I think you'll agree that very often the drama gets acted out in places other than on the stage or in front of the camera.

So if you're interested in trying Flylady's system for yourself, go to [Flylady.net](http://Flylady.net) and try signing up (they make it easy to sign up or unsubscribe). The best thing about the system is that it is completely adaptable to any lifestyle whatsoever. With some thought and experimentation you can custom-design routines to fit your own daily life and the pursuit of your career. Don't be overwhelmed by the e:mails: they are sent by someone who cares and who wants you to be peaceful, productive and happy.

*Karen Kohlhaas is a New York based theater director, a founding member of the Atlantic Theater Company, and a senior teacher at the Atlantic Acting School. She teaches private monologue classes in New York and internationally, is the author of "The Monologue Audition: A Practical Guide for Actors," and is the director/writer/producer of THE MONOLOGUE AUDITION VIDEO, a 120-minute instructional dvd for actors or anyone who wants to present themselves well, available on her website [www.monologueaudition.com](http://www.monologueaudition.com).*

*Copyright 2006 by Karen Kohlhaas  
Individuals have permission to duplicate or distribute this article if done so in its entirety.*

[E:mail this article to a friend](#)  
[Download this article as PDF](#)

