

WOMEN WHO SPARK

*12 Steps to Catapult Happiness,
Cultivate Confidence, and
Discover the Purpose of Your Life*

*Aleta*NORRIS

Author Academy Elite

Copyright © 2019 Aleta Norris
All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

Published by Author Academy Elite
P.O. Box 43, Powell, OH 43035

AuthorAcademyElite.com

Visit the author's website at www.aletanorris.com

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – for example, electronic, photocopy, recording – without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

For quantity orders, please contact me directly at aleta@aletanorris.com

Paperback ISBN-13:978-1-64085-551-9
Hardcover ISBN-13:978-1-64085-552-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019930311

Although the author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct at press time, the author and publisher do not assume and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

*Aleta*NORRIS

Dedication

To my grandparents, Loren and Bertha Mae, for teaching me kindness and service to others. I treasure my many years with you, especially as a little girl, and I miss you immeasurably.

To my husband, Steve, for being my best guy ever. Thank you for letting me completely be me . . . and for letting it be okay that I don't return that favor to you.

To my "original" three children, Jaimie, Ben, and Steph, for the absolute joy of raising you into adulthood. I am beyond grateful to be your mom.

To Joe and Haley, for rounding out my family to be the large family I dreamed of having. You have added to my joy.

To my dad, for being my first example of a kind, gracious, courageous single parent.

Table of Contents

Foreword by *Katie Brazelton*

Introduction

PART I: YOUR FOUNDATION

Step One: Get to Know Yourself

Step Two: Look Back So You Can Move Forward

Step Three: Understand Your Roles and Relationships

PART II: FIND YOUR SPARKS

Step Four: Find Happiness in Your Ordinary Day

Step Five: Cultivate Confidence

Step Six: Spark Anyway

PART III: MAKE EVERYTHING BRIGHTER

Step Seven: Spark Happiness for Others

Step Eight: Stay Calm

PART IV: DISCOVER YOUR BIGGER PURPOSE

Step Nine: Discover Your Purpose and Passion

Step Ten: Do It Afraid

Step Eleven: Go Get Your Sparks!

Step Twelve: Keep Your Sparks Alive

Where Do You Go From Here?

Acknowledgments

Book Club Discussion Guide

Foreword

I first met Aleta in 2006 when she came to California to spend two full days with me doing her LifePlan. She had read my book, *Pathway to Purpose for Women: Connecting Your To-Do List, Your Passions, and God's Purposes for Your Life*, and was in search of the spark she had lost when life circumstances stripped away her dreams. My book had introduced the question, “What is the connection between my life purposes and the daily existence I am living now?”— but she wanted to meet privately about how to live well in the ordinary day-to-day, while also experiencing broader significance. She knew that she needed to put her past behind, pursue peace, find courage, and surrender to God if she wanted to be all he created her to be!

Aleta had so much on her mind when I picked her up for our get-acquainted dinner the evening before our two-day sessions began, but the first thing I noticed was that she was not one to feel sorry for herself. In our time together, she indicated that she was ready to explore all spiritual, personal, and professional growth necessary to accomplish her ultimate goal, which was to showcase God's faithfulness through all her varied trials and bring glory to him while sharing her journey with others.

In 2007, when I launched my inaugural group of Life Purpose Coach® trainees through Life Purpose Coaching Centers International®, I was delighted that Aleta joined us for purpose-coaching certification. She showed up with her signature blend of calmness, kindness, and compassion—paired with a pragmatic, no-nonsense approach of steering toward tangible outcomes.

Aleta fully embraced that coaching process and became ready to live out her God-given purpose in life, namely to be an encourager of women, to be one who sparks joy in herself and the lives of others. Is it an accident that, right now, you're reading her book, *Women Who Spark*, or is it more likely that God has created her to bless you?

I love this gal to pieces for, not only rising above her struggles and allowing God to turn her life into something beautiful, but also using her experiences to help others rise above their circumstances. I hope that one day you will have the privilege of calling Aleta “friend,” as I do. Connect with her and your life will be changed forever. Tap into the tremendous gifts God has entrusted to Aleta to help you live your best life.

Katie Brazelton, PhD

Author of books on the topic of God's Plan for our lives, including *Pathway to Purpose*, *Praying for Purpose*, *Conversations on Purpose*, *Character Makeover*, and *Live Big*.

Introduction

As you look around, does it appear that other women's lives are running more smoothly, and perhaps more happily, than yours?

Are you struggling to manage everything happening in your life?

Do you sometimes feel that everyone else's dreams are coming true, exactly the way they've imagined, while yours are not? Their careers are on track, their work is meaningful, their families are happy and healthy, their relationships are solid, and they're fit, energized, and fulfilled in every way?

You are not alone.

Many women I talk to are struggling in one of these ways. And, with so many balls to juggle, it's easy to feel stretched thin. A friend of mine shared recently, "I was with a group of girlfriends all weekend and we talked about these exact concerns. The consensus among us: We're underwhelmed by where we are going—and overwhelmed by where we are today."

Do you relate to this struggle?

I want to assure you that what you're feeling is normal, but it doesn't have to be this way.

Like you, I have been on a journey to live a happy, fulfilling life. I have tried to, as effectively as possible, juggle many things and face the unexpected imperfections of life with as much grace as possible.

While I struggled to balance everything, I often looked around and envied the women who had a more put-together life and an easier set of circumstances. The irony was in the number of women who, I came to learn, looked at me as the put-together one.

I wrote this book because I know we are the same and I want to provide encouragement and camaraderie.

In this book, you will learn how to find greater happiness and confidence while meeting your daily demands—and you'll be challenged to go after your spark.

Your *spark*?

You will know if you have it. It's about being on fire. When you have a spark, you are confident, happy, and doing things to support your purpose or passion in the world. You're doing things you love and impacting the lives of others. You're excited to wake up and get your day started. You have somewhere to go, things to do, people to affect, dreams to advance . . . and, you need more hours in your day because you don't want to stop.

Are you ready to meet this new version of you—this woman who lights up a room the moment she steps through the door? It's time to get to work.

When you do the work contained in each chapter of this book, you will begin to tame the whirlwind that's tearing through your life. You will develop a plan to change the things you can control—and to spark anyway when you can't make a situation better.

When you know who you are and what you're supposed to be doing with your life, you'll also be able to break free from the "comparison game" trap. You know that feeling you get when you're scrolling through your Facebook newsfeed looking at carefully curated "candid" photos of others? It can feel like some people have everything and it comes so easily to them. Do you catch yourself daydreaming?

If only I could be more like them. If only I could be that happy, confident, and sure of myself. What would that be like? Is that even possible?

That's the comparison game trap and your daydream is where you might be wrong. The women you respect and admire (and, perhaps, envy) are likely struggling, too.

This book is for you if:

- You wonder if there is something more to life than what you have going on right now.
- You sense a lack of purpose or direction in your days.
- You reflect on your past with some regret for decisions you've made.
- Your life isn't coming together like you thought it would.
- You're overwhelmed.
- You struggle with self-doubt and insecurity.
- You look around and feel like everyone is happier than you.
- You see other women doing things they love, and you believe you could never have what they have.

If any of these things resonate with you, you are not alone. Public personas very often do not match private battles.

When you gain the confidence to stop looking around—and start working on you—everything will change. You will no longer feel lonely in a room full of people. You will be able to ask for and accept help without feeling like a failure. You will start doing what's best for you—and everyone around you will benefit as you grow.

PART I: YOUR FOUNDATION

Step One: Get to Know Yourself

In order to go after the life you want to lead, you need to answer this question: Who am I?

It sounds simple, but it's incredibly important. Without a solid sense of self, you may spend your life focusing on what others want from you. You might already be experiencing that self-sacrifice.

Can you relate to any of the statements below?

- I don't even know who I am anymore.
- I've been so busy being what everyone else needs, I've lost my own voice.
- I'm going through the motions.
- Somewhere along the way, I stopped thinking about myself.
- I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing.
- I look in the mirror and I don't see what I want to see.
- I prioritize others, but I don't prioritize myself.

Knowing who you are is essential to leading a happy, confident, purpose-driven life. At the same time, it can feel overwhelming—maybe even intimidating—to dig into deep questions about your identity. But I want to encourage you: you can do this . . . and I can help.

In this chapter, we will take a look at who you are, who you want to be, and how other people see you. Doing the work below is your first step toward becoming a woman who sparks.

Discover Who You Are

How do you show up in the world? In other words, take a moment to focus on the experiences other people have when they are with you. This is a critical focal point, because understanding how you appear to others provides important information about how your actual behavior may differ from your good intentions. Once you know how others perceive you, you'll be able to figure out whether you are being your best true self or you have something to change for that purpose.

You can begin to connect with who you are—and how you appear to the world—in three ways:

1. Be Quiet

When you are in your car, turn off the radio. When you're taking your dog for a walk, leave your earbuds at home. In a noisy world, it's important to find opportunities to be silent, think, and reflect. Replay situations with others in your mind. What do you notice about yourself? What do others think of you? What do they like? What do they not like?

As you reflect, think about the women you know who light up a room when they walk through the door. Everyone is happy to see them. They are engaging, encouraging, and interested in others. They have a positive outlook. Are there ways you can be more like those women, while still being true to yourself? You aren't necessarily trying to act like them. Instead, think about ways you can use your own personality strengths to make other people around you feel amazing about themselves.

Now think about women who have the opposite effect. Who are those women for you? Are those the women who gossip or talk about others negatively? Is it those who bring an aura of jealousy or criticism? What characteristics do you find to be a negative drain in a room? Perhaps the women who bring these experiences are unhappy themselves and struggling to bring joy to their surroundings. When *they* walk into a room, people find themselves on edge. Do you exhibit some of the character traits that are draining even to yourself? What about when you're feeling stressed out? Are there some things you can do to reduce tension for yourself and others?

2. Ask for Feedback

This is a tough one. If you're in a leadership position, it may feel like asking for feedback is a sign of weakness. However, being willing to be humble and learn more about yourself will help you grow stronger—and inspire confidence in the people you lead and interact with on a daily basis.

Your conversation might sound something like this:

"Katie, could I ask you to share some feedback with me. I'd like to get your opinion about a couple of things you like or appreciate about me—assuming there are some—and a couple of things I could work on. Would you be willing to share?"

You'll notice a touch of humor and humility go a long way toward making the conversation less tense. It's also important to make sure you don't argue with those you're getting feedback from. If Katie says, "You can tend to be negative when you talk about other people," your initial instinct may be to get defensive, but a healthier response would be, "Could you tell me more about that?" If you can keep her talking longer, you'll learn a lot more. Many times, people struggle to say exactly what they mean when they are surprised by a question. If you can engage in a meaningful conversation, you may discover communication problems and areas where your intentions are misinterpreted by others.

Also remember to go into this conversation expecting to get some negative feedback or suggestions. Welcome them. If Katie tells you that you talk about other people behind their backs, you can say, "Wow, you're right. I need to stop. Do you have suggestions to remind myself when I'm doing that?" Own it and show a willingness to improve.

Finally, remember when you ask others for feedback you need to be ready to take it. Don't allow yourself to develop hard feelings over something someone said. You asked for feedback. And it's okay if the people around you have held negative views of your behavior. You're about to blow them away by growing, changing, and becoming the woman you are meant to be.

3. Invest in Personal and Professional Development

I can't imagine growing as a person without the help of talented authors, speakers, and trainers supporting me in my journey. I learn so much by reading books, attending workshops and conferences, and tuning into YouTube channels and podcasts. There is more to learn about human nature and about the complexities of relationships than we can figure out ourselves. (Be sure to check out AletaNorris.com to connect with me and join a tribe of women committed to personal and professional growth.)

I once had an opportunity to work with twenty-four people from one company who had been in leadership roles for several years without any formal leadership training. In that particular workshop, we talked at length about human nature, thinking of people as people (not as objects), and having regard for individuals. At the end of the workshop, we went around the room to hear each person share something meaningful learned during our time together. One gentleman said, "I am so ashamed of myself for how I have treated people for thirty years. I didn't know any of this. No one ever taught me these things." This was long-overdue development, and it was necessary for growth. I asked him if he would be interested in apologizing to the people he had mistreated over the years. He was so grateful for the idea. Without wasting any time, he embarked on an apology tour, surprising many people along the way. The people he talked to were so appreciative of his selfless apology. This experience taught him to be more compassionate with people. He was able to retire a few years later with a clear conscience.

Does that story inspire you? How would being quiet, asking for feedback, and investing in your personal and professional development help you make the world a better place, for both yourself and others?

Where will you begin?

Let's put these three ideas together.

"Tough Love" Turnaround

Years ago, I coached a woman named Elizabeth. People struggled to work with her. You see, Elizabeth was not a nice person—and certainly not a happy one. She felt she knew more than others around her. She was critical, blame oriented, and seldom smiled. A furrowed brow was her style. In most situations, she was unwilling to listen to others' ideas. When things went wrong, she was quick to point her finger at others. It was important to her that others saw her as right.

This may not surprise you, but Elizabeth also had difficult relationships at home. She was often at odds with someone in her family. When we met for her coaching sessions, she used at least a portion of our time to vent and share stories about the injustices that surrounded her.

Because Elizabeth was interested in growing in her career, there were some things she needed to get a handle on. I knew that, but I'm not sure Elizabeth knew that. She needed time to think, get some feedback, and grow as a person.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth was not ready to be quiet and think. She was in a state of denial about herself. She didn't see what others saw. In this case, I decided to start with feedback. With her reluctant permission, we started gathering feedback using an anonymous process.

Elizabeth would have a lot of thinking to do. And her personal development would be more effective if it were launched with an awareness of who she was to others—she needed to have a clear understanding of her starting point.

Going into the process, she said to me, "I know people have a perception I'm difficult to work with." I had known Elizabeth for some time by then and we had a comfortable, honest, and trusting relationship. I said, "I am going to challenge your thinking. Perhaps it's not their perception; perhaps it's their experiences with you." She wasn't thrilled.

Are you familiar with the concept of "360-degree feedback?" This is a process in which a person like Elizabeth receives feedback from others around them. In a work situation, this could be their boss (above), their peer group (equal), and their direct reports (below).

The tricky thing about 360-degree feedback assessments is that people have often been seeing themselves differently than others see them. The reason for this? Most of us view ourselves based upon the intentions we have. For example, imagine you wake up every day and intend to be a good person, friendly to others, not wanting to hurt people, wanting to be understood by people, and wanting to be helpful. Since your intentions are good, it is likely you will think, "I am a good person."

Research, combined with experience, tells us a different story. Let's test this on you. Think about someone you struggle with. Would it be fair to say your perception of this person is based upon a recent, not-so-great experience? Or maybe it's a pattern or accumulation of behavior over time. If someone loses his or her temper with you, your perception will likely be that this person is not nice. If people don't come through for you at times when you really need them, it's likely you perceive that they can't be counted on. Within their own minds, however, these may simply be "one of those things," and certainly not a reflection of who they really are.

We administered the 360-degree feedback process for Elizabeth. We gathered feedback from about twenty people. The results were devastating. She was not prepared for the negative perspectives and experiences people shared about their relationships with her.

They viewed her as unfriendly, unhelpful, arrogant, self-centered, blame-oriented, insensitive, and aloof. As difficult as this feedback was for Elizabeth to receive, it served as a wake-up call.

She was ready to be quiet and reflect. To rephrase that, I asked her to be quiet and reflect. She was extremely uncomfortable for several days. She eventually became ready to do the hard work to grow as a person. She also became more concerned about how she was affecting others, rather than focusing on protecting herself. Once she embraced personal development, she began to make noticeable progress.

You may have a more positive outlook on life than Elizabeth did, but all of us have areas where we can improve. In almost every 360 I've done for women over the years, there is something negative that shows up regularly.

Do you tend to exhibit any of these characteristics?

- You withdraw.
- You become aggressive in your demands.
- You get emotional.
- You are argumentative.
- You hold a grudge.
- You avoid difficult conversations.
- You are impatient.
- You don't hold people accountable.

We all have something we can improve upon. Knowing where to improve is key. If you don't know what your shortcomings are, you have a blind spot. Your blind spots may be the things between your current reality and getting to a place where you can be a woman who sparks.

Dig Deeper

Use the exercise on the following pages to compare your self-perceptions (the way you see yourself) with the perceptions you believe others have of you.

As you consider your own self-perception, think about your behaviors when things are going well and how you perform on an average day. Then compare that to situations when you are under stress or when things are not going your way. Maybe a co-worker missed a deadline, your kids are not getting out of bed to get ready for school, your spouse is more interested in the football game than listening to you, your server forgot to bring you the water you asked for, or a friend let you down when you needed her. Do you find yourself reacting negatively in any of these situations? Do you judge your co-worker harshly? Do you yell at the kids? Do you go on a tirade with your husband? Do you flag the server down with intolerance? Do you show your frustration with the employee at work?

Human nature is such that your perception of yourself will be most closely related to your intentions and to the positive behaviors you see within yourself. The perceptions others have of you will be most closely related to their experiences with your negative behavior.

This exercise will give you an opportunity to find your starting point, so you can grow as you work through the rest of this book.

Reflect

Starting with your own self-perception, name three to five words you would use to describe yourself when things are going well and you are at your best.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now, write down three to five words others might use to describe you when you are dealing with frustrations. It may help if you reflect on some recent frustrating moments with family members, co-workers, or friends.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

I know this exercise can be difficult. Many women find it challenging to come up with the right words. You might be thinking, 'I don't know. You'll have to ask other people.' You can certainly do that. I encourage you, however, to find that quiet time to reflect. Become skilled in knowing who you are.

As I went through this exercise myself, I realized that I see myself as patient, calm, understanding, kind and happy. Others, who endure moments with me when things are not going well, might say I'm intolerant, detached, impatient, cavalier and dismissive. Both sets of words can be true at times. These things are influenced by my internal belief that everything will ultimately be okay, so let's move forward and take the first step.

I've always been an "Ah, just spit on it, rub some dirt on it, and you'll be fine" kind of person. What's important is knowing how your personality might affect others. Since I know that I'm sometimes not good at expressing empathy, I can watch for situations when I may come across the wrong way.

Building upon this idea of self-perception—and to help you in the exercise—let's approach this another way. Below is a list of personal qualities and behaviors. For each pair, select the word you believe is the most accurate representation of you, day in and day out. Feel free to skip any along the way if you feel stuck. Sometimes you may think, 'It depends.' In those cases, choose the word you think others would be most likely to use when describing you. Or select the quality or behavior most likely to show up more than half the time—particularly if you're frustrated.

Rude	Considerate	Selfish	Thankful	Grumpy	Joyful
Impatient	Patient	Ungrateful	Grateful	Disorganized	Organized
Angry	Pleasant	Blame Oriented	Gracious	Unreliable	Reliable
Interruptive	Good Listener	Unpleasant	Pleasant	Lazy	Hard Working
Emotional	Calm	Critical	Affirming	Immature	Mature
Gossipy	Not Gossipy	Aloof	Welcoming	Unkind	Kind
Judgmental	Non-Judgmental	Defend Your Actions	Own Your Actions	Dishonest	Honest
Loud	Quiet	Discouraging	Motivating	Messy	Neat
Critical	Encouraging	Chaotic	Poised	Sulky	Joyful
Moody	Even Tempered	Apathetic	Caring	Aggressive	Assertive
Sad	Happy	Arrogant	Humble	Unhelpful	Helpful

What do you think of your results? Are you happy with some things, but others make you cringe? If so, you're normal.

As you reflect on the words you circled, think about what they have to say about the impact you have on the world. Your goal needs to be to encourage others and help them experience more joy in life.

Does it sound like I am imposing this on you? I am. You cannot have happiness and confidence if you do not contribute positively to others. If you do have happiness and confidence while adversely affecting others, I would argue that your happiness is on the surface. . . and your confidence comes with a price. Or it's a façade.

Give Yourself a Break

We've been tackling some tough concepts in this chapter. Now I want you to take a moment to consider some of the reasons you may be struggling in certain areas. Do you tend to lash out at others because you are overwhelmed, stressed out, and frustrated? As we move through this book, I'm going to encourage you to find ways to "tame the whirlwind" in your life. Sometimes that will involve saying "no" to things you should not be taking on. Other times it will mean coming to terms with things you cannot change. In this first step, I want you to start focusing more on how your behavior affects others. I also want you to spend less time worrying about what others think about you. The difference between these two concepts may seem nuanced, but the impact on your life can be significant.

I know far too many women who allow what others *might think* rule their lives. Living with a sense of fear or self-doubt due to a lack of acceptance and affirmation from others will make it difficult for you to be a happy, fulfilled woman who sparks joy in those around her.

Do thoughts like these play repeatedly in your mind?

- But, what will they think?
- I wonder if they'll like me.
- If I do that, people will think I'm crazy.
- I wonder what people will say.

I remember struggling with these kinds of thoughts when I was contemplating my second divorce. At the time, I was lost inside a marriage to a man who struggled with alcoholism and, most importantly, who refused to get help. I was so focused on not triggering his abusive tendencies that I wasn't thinking clearly. I stayed longer than I should have because I was caught up in wondering what others would think.

Have you ever been trapped in a mess in your own life? Have you allowed the fear of what others think to paralyze you when you've needed to take action? When I finally drummed up the courage to get out of my bad situation, I was so surprised. The people I thought would judge me were supportive. Many times, we don't give other people enough credit. (They also have their own situations to worry about.)

I recently came across a stack of cards I received during that difficult season. The support from women around me was heartfelt. They were uplifting and encouraging. And, there were women available to help in any way I needed.

Getting through a difficult situation can also help you begin to see yourself more clearly to decide what kind of impact you want to have on the world.

<callout>After that divorce, I started asking myself some serious questions. Who am I? What is my purpose? What am I passionate about? How can I recapture my joy? What do I need to do to strengthen my professional success? What role can friends play in my life? What are my interests? How do I impact others? What will my legacy be? How can I stop feeling sorry for myself? How can I shift my focus away from loneliness and fear?</callout>

If I could find the answers to these questions, it felt like I could make a bigger difference in the world. I no longer wanted to use my precious energy to merely survive each day. I wanted to use it to thrive. Fifteen years later, I continue to ponder these questions. I never stop asking, thinking, and growing.

Your Day-To-Day Impact on Others

One way we can grow as women is to view our relationships as a series of one-to-one encounters. Each encounter, including the words we speak, will have an impact on our relationship, either positive or negative.

You can use a simple concept I call “above-the-line and below-the-line” to measure the experience others have with you on a daily basis.

Above-the-line interactions add positivity to others’ lives and to your relationships with them. Below-the-line interactions add feelings of negativity. Assuming everyone is at a neutral point when they begin an interaction with you, does your interaction add positivity, almost like a deposit, to their lives? Or does it add negativity, like a withdrawal, to their lives? And how about for yourself? Even if no one else is in the room, do you help yourself feel better or worse?

↑↑↑ ABOVE THE LINE IS LIKE A DEPOSIT ↑↑↑

↓↓↓ BELOW THE LINE IS LIKE A WITHDRAWAL ↓↓↓

Below is a list of common interactions that would tend to add positivity to your life and to the lives of others. These are what I would label as above-the-line interactions. Put a checkmark by the ones that are typical for you:

- Say “good morning” with a smile.
- Greet people by name.
- Even when the checkout person does not greet you with a smile, greet him or her with a smile.
- When the server forgets your water, you might say, “Just a friendly reminder to bring me some water when you have a chance.”
- If someone is frustrated with you because you dropped the ball on something, you can affirm their “rightness” with a comment like, “You are right, and I’m so sorry. Here is what I can do.”
- If you’re not a morning person, you can still say “good morning” to your family or co-workers with a smile.
- If someone is angry toward you, you can choose to remain calm.
- If someone is not smiling at you, you could ask, “Is everything okay?” Or, you might simply smile at them.
- If someone in line behind you has only one item, you let them go ahead of you.

Now let's look at some common interactions that likely add negativity to your life and the lives of others. These are the below-the-line interactions. These things alone may not devastate people, but life can be hard—you don't know what's going on behind the scenes in another person's world.

Put a checkmark by the responses that may be typical for you:

- You do not say "good morning" to people.
- You do not greet people by name. (This is a missed opportunity to make someone feel valued.)
- You may say to a gloomy cashier, "You must be having a bad day." (This one is accompanied by an edge of attitude.)
- "Excuse me, my water please?" (Also, with some attitude.)
- If someone calls you out, you defend yourself rather than own the problem.
- If you're not a morning person, you're grumpy and make it clear to others that you are not a morning person.
- If someone is angry toward you, you respond in anger.
- If someone is not smiling, you ask, "What's your problem?"
- If someone in line behind you has only one item, you pretend like you don't notice.

None of these incidents alone are life altering. They are simple, common, not-a-big-deal moments. However, each negative interaction can feel like a pinch. We all get pinched plenty of times a day. You can choose to light up someone's day instead.

As we move forward, it's important for you to know who you want to be and how you want to impact the world around you. How do you want to affect the lives of people in your life, including people you don't even know? What legacy do you want to leave behind?

Commit to becoming an improved person today by filling in the blank line below:

I am someone who _____

Step Two: Look Back So You Can Move Forward

You are not your past. Well, at least not the not-so-great stuff. You are definitely the good stuff. And as we move forward, do not forget that part of you.

If you are like most women, thinking about some parts of your past is a cringe-inducing experience. But you absolutely need to go there in order to move forward. Processing some of the things you've done—and things that have been done to you—is an essential step in the process of discovering a new, more confident, happier version of yourself. You can do this.

Identify Your Pain Points

- Are you paralyzed by past experiences?
- Did you struggle as a child to receive approval from at least one parent?
- Did you have a sibling who was the favorite?
- Have you made decisions that you regret?
- Do you sometimes feel hopeless and helpless because you are not where you want to be?
- Are you discouraged that you don't make enough money or that you haven't saved enough money?
- Are you upset with yourself for getting out of shape?
- Is a mean comment from years and years ago still stuck in your brain?
- Are you struggling to forgive yourself for something you've done? Or is there something you didn't do?
- Are you mad at yourself for choosing a profession you find unfulfilling?
- Are you disappointed because your career has been impacted by things outside of your control?
- Are you kicking yourself because you spent your money having fun along the way and now have to continue working as some of your friends are moving into retirement?
- Have past relationships derailed you?
- Do you regret not making amends with a loved one before he or she died?
- Do you wish you had finished college?
- Are you upset with yourself for wasting away your childhood? Twenties? Thirties? ANY years?"

In *WoulDa, CouLda, ShoulDa: Overcoming Regrets, Mistakes, and Missed Opportunities*, Authors Dr. Arthur Freeman and Rose Wolf tell us that dwelling on past experiences prevents us from experiencing pleasure in the present. Rather than asking, "Why?" we should be asking, "What next?" You can't spark if you're stuck in the past. Instead, figure out how you can make the most of what you've learned, look for new opportunities, and find hope in life's possibilities.[i]

Authors Carole Klein and Richard Gotti, PhD also share helpful insights in *Overcoming Regret: Lessons From The Roads Not Taken*. While regret may imply a personal failure, it is a natural and necessary part of life. We all fall short at times. However, if we'll let them, our experiences can fuel future growth. The key is to focus on what comes next rather than dwelling on the past.[i]

After I went through my second divorce, I was in a difficult place. The marriage was a financial disaster. I went to see a financial advisor—and it's almost an understatement to say he reprimanded me. In a raised voice, he said, "You have a fraction of what you should have in investments, you are living a consumption lifestyle, and you will be in bad shape when you are older if you do not do something." I was so angry with him for what he said, but mostly **how** he said it.

I fumed for a few days and then I jumped into action. I pulled out my journal and documented my current reality. I got on Amazon and ordered a bunch of books about investing. I was filled with regret, fear, and embarrassment—fear most of all. One book gave me the encouragement I needed. In *Start Late, Finish Rich*, author David Bach said:

"Give yourself a break: everyone makes mistakes—smart people learn from them. The fastest way to get rid of regrets is acknowledge them....and burn them up. It's never too late to start."[i]

I needed encouragement and his words helped. I was ready to start clawing my way to a better place.

By the way, I didn't go back to that financial advisor. Even though I needed his message at the time, I didn't have the strength to be demeaned in the process of trying to improve. I vowed I would never use an approach like that in my conversations with another human being. Tough love is good but demeaning and diminishing others for their place in life, not so much.

Almost all women I know have encountered tough circumstances in their pasts. Those difficult times can affect your thinking and fill you with self-doubt, low self-esteem, and self-limiting beliefs.

Do you struggle with any of the thoughts below?

- I'm not pretty enough.
- I'm not smart enough.
- I'm not talented enough.
- I'm not thin enough.
- I'll never have a job I love.
- I don't have any friends.
- I'm not likable.
- I'll never amount to anything.

How many of these beliefs are tied to what other people have done or said to you? If you're consumed with memories of things that have been said, it's time to let them go. Don't allow your value as a person to be defined by a conversation from your past. You are now in the business of building a bright future for yourself and improving the experience of everyone who interacts with you. The only thing you need to carry forward from your past is wisdom gleaned from some of your most trying experiences.

Let's pause and take inventory. I want you to do an above-the-line, below-the-line exercise, looking back over your life, decade by decade. The purpose of this activity is to help you see where you've come from so you'll be able to better articulate where you want to go in the future.

I understand if you're not a "do work in a book" kind of woman. Can I push you? You're on a quest to become a *woman who sparks*, and I am confident you will be more successful if you do the work. It may help to find a place where you're comfortable and can focus. Find a pen you love or sharpen a new pencil. Make a hot cup of tea or pour a glass of your favorite wine. Put on some music. In other words, create an environment that will help you enjoy the experience.

Are you with me? Are you ready to reflect? Remember to use top of mind thinking. This means that whatever comes to mind first is the thought to jot down quickly. You don't have to dig deep. Your first instinct is likely the accurate one in a self-reflection exercise. You're not in therapy right now. You're in a creative thinking mode. You're simply trying to get a handle on some of the things that have contributed to who you are today—so you can plan for the future.

Okay, let's get started.

Your teenage years:

What good thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that helped fuel your confidence?





What difficult thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that chipped away at your confidence?

Your twenties:

What good thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that helped fuel your confidence?





What difficult thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that chipped away at your confidence?

Your thirties:

What good thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that helped fuel your confidence?





What difficult thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that chipped away at your confidence?

Your forties:

What good thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that helped fuel your confidence?





What difficult thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that chipped away at your confidence?

Your fifties:

What good thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that helped fuel your confidence?



What difficult thing(s) happened in your life during this decade?

What do you recall people saying to you that chipped away at your confidence?

I'll stop here. If you're older than fifty, like me, please continue on another piece of paper or in your journal. If you're younger, you can still do this exercise. You may wish to break the questions down into smaller chunks of time, such as five years or—for the lucky woman who is trying to get a handle on life as early as her twenties, you may wish to look at different life seasons, such as your elementary years, middle school years, high school years, college, and early adulthood. The above-the-line and below-the-line exercise can help you become a woman who sparks regardless of when you are starting.

Let's reflect:

- What did you discover about yourself?
- What have you been reminded of?
- Do you have some validation for why you are primarily a joyful person?
- Or perhaps, do you have some validation for why you are struggling?
- Have you had a mostly good life, or have you had your fair share of challenges?
- Where do you want to go from here?
- What will you let go of?
- What and who do you need to find peace with?
- Who do you need to have a conversation with?
- What wisdom gleaned can you leverage for the future?

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey, has provided a roadmap for many people's lives. In the first habit, "Be Proactive," Covey tells us the serious problem with reactive language is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we tell ourselves things like, "There's nothing I can do", "That's the way I am", "I can't", "I must", and "If only," the more we can produce evidence to support those things. Unfortunately, beliefs like that make us feel increasingly victimized. Proactive thinking, on the other hand, will lead us to tell ourselves things like, "I can", "I will", "I choose to", "I will create", and "I prefer."^[i] Proactive thinking helps us take initiative. Reactive thinking can fuel feelings of pain and prompt us to focus on what might have been instead of what is. Proactive thinking will help propel us into a problem-solving and solution-creating mode.

Where will you take initiative? How will you change your thinking?

I know this can be a tough chapter to tackle. When I think about my childhood, I remember the trauma caused when my mom left our family when I was eight-years old. I realize it affected me in adverse ways: I do not have a relationship with my mom, I will likely never know what it feels like to have a mom to turn to, and there are things I did not have role modeled for me or taught to me in a measured, gradual way. I became overly independent and did not learn to negotiate in my relationships. My kids are also affected by not having an involved grandma.

On the other hand, there are ways that difficult experience may have helped me. When my mom left, I jumped into action. I helped my dad around the house and watched my little sister. That traumatic situation helped me grow into a productive and independent young woman. My friends called me a thirty-year old ten-year old. I learned how to do a lot of things I may not have otherwise figured out. My dad was calm, kind, loving, and encouraging. He told me my whole life that I could do whatever I set my mind to. I'm not sure he would have been able to shine in that way if my mom were there.

I encourage you to pause and reflect on what you're still hanging on to from your past experiences. Are you regretful? Resentful? Keeping score? Refusing to let go? Identify a couple of areas where you can be more proactive.

We are all in control of our patterns of thinking. It may not be easy for you to shift from below-the-line thinking to above-the-line, proactive thinking, but it's worth learning to master your mind so it will serve you better in the future. Making peace with your past will be a big step forward.

[i] Freeman, Dr. Arthur and DeWolf, Rose, *Would, Coulda, Shoulda: Overcoming Regrets, Mistakes and Missed Opportunities*, (Harper Perennial, New York, 1989), p. 31

[ii] Klein, Carole and Gotti, Richard, *Overcoming Regret: Lessons From The Roads Not Taken*, (Bantam Books, New York, 1992), p. ix

[iii] Bach, David, *Start Late, Finish Rich* (Broadway, New York, 2005).

[ix] Covey, Stephen, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989), p. 79.

Hello friend,

Thank you so much for reading these first two chapters of "Women Who Spark." If you'd like to order a signed copy, visit www.aletanorris.com/order. And, my book is available on Amazon, as well.

Have a beautiful day!

XOXO Aleta