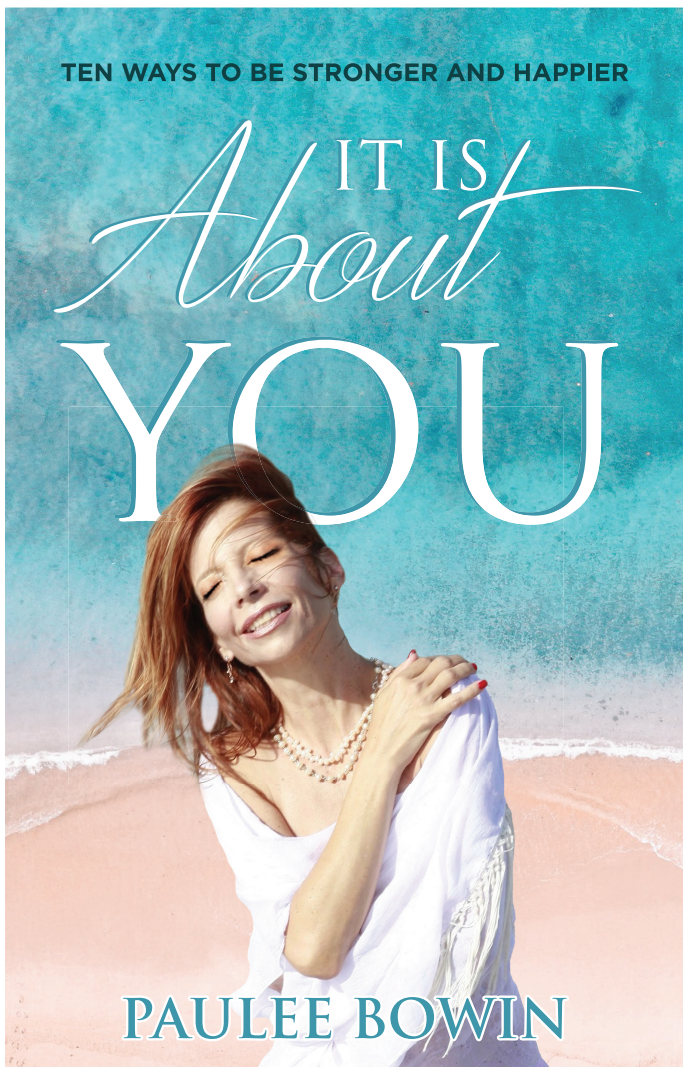


TEN WAYS TO BE STRONGER AND HAPPIER

IT IS  
*About*  
YOU

PAULEE BOWIN



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Mermaid sketches by Paulee Bowin

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Own Your Place in the World*

From the day we are born, each of us struggles to figure out where we fit in, where we are meant to be, and who we are meant to become. I've always identified with mermaids—even though they aren't real—because they are creatures that don't fit into either world: land or sea. For me, that journey to find my place was so much harder, partly because I found out when I was four that I wasn't who everyone told me I was. I think that had a major impact on both how I viewed myself and on other peoples' opinions of me.

I always felt different from everyone else. At some point, I realized I didn't look like everyone else in my family, so I started asking questions. I was precocious

and curious by nature, and relentlessly bombarded my parents with questions until they finally admitted that they had adopted me when I was eleven days old. No matter how much my mom insisted that I had been wanted because she had asked for me and desperately wanted me when they adopted me, I couldn't shake that feeling of being rejected.

Did my birth mom give me away because I wasn't good enough somehow? Was she angry that she'd gotten pregnant with me? Glad to be rid of this human who had complicated her life? These questions plagued my life and were part of what undermined my **confidence**. But what hurt me even more was the way other women treated me. Their bullying fed the parts of me that didn't feel good enough or wanted.

## BULLYING DOESN'T END IN HIGH SCHOOL

My parents were wonderful but, like many children, I was bullied and teased most of my childhood. I became fascinated with mermaids because they were these mythical creatures who were a mix of land and sea, both fascinating to and feared by anyone traveling across the ocean. My **imagination** helped me through some of the toughest times because I would get lost in the stories I read, and then I'd create stories of my own. I imagined becoming a mermaid, beautiful and free from all of the pain, and swimming all over the world

to new places. I pretty much did anything to keep my mind occupied so I didn't think about the bullying. I memorized the names of all the actors in my favorite shows, the lineup of the Kansas City Royals, all fifty state capitals, etc. Memorization and reading became my **coping** mechanisms.

However, I still struggled. No matter how 'smart' I became or how pretty I was, it was never enough to gain acceptance. Even as early as second grade, I remember girls ganging up on each other and on me. I was repeatedly called ugly, different, weird, too small, and too sensitive. All that cruelty added to my feelings of being unwanted, useless...and for a long time I wondered why I was born at all. Even as an adult, I sometimes struggle and hear those words echo in my head.

This intense girl-on-girl conflict continued sporadically throughout elementary school and had a devastating effect on my self-esteem. I was so busy losing the battle of trying to gain their **approval** that I began to hate myself, and my perception of myself was permanently colored.

So many of us reach this point and suffer long-term and life-altering consequences as we grow into teens and women. Bullying is very real and very detrimental, and is something that should never be dismissed. As young girls, we don't realize how significant an impact those childhood wounds can have on us as adults. Even when we are grown up, we minimize the effects other people's words have on us.



## *Be Atagartis*

The first mention of a mermaid in ancient literature is associated with Atargatis, the Syrian goddess of fertility. She was responsible for the protection and well-being of the people who worshipped her. Legend has it that she dove into the sea, but only the bottom half of her body transformed into a fish.

Bullying is so prevalent in this world, for children and adults. Become Atagartis for yourself and the people around you:

- Recognize the bullying is happening.
- Realize that bullying is about the other person's insecurities, not yours.
- Step in and say something; shining a light on a problem is the only way to bring it out of the darkness.



The girls who bullied me did so to the point where I would go home and puke, then beg my parents to move me to another school. There were days when I contemplated suicide because I just wanted it to end. Every time, I pulled myself together and reminded

myself that I was unique and special just as I was, and I wasn't going to let those girls succeed in destroying me. It was a gradual process, but I learned to be okay with myself exactly as I was.

For most women, being okay with who we are right this second is a daily battle, partly because of those childhood wounds. We struggle to be perfect as mothers, partners, business people, students, daughters...everything. We stress over the soufflé and the floors and worry that we are too anxious or too crabby or too loud. We fuss in the mirror and count every calorie. It's an exhausting battle; and here's the ironic part—we are doing all of that stressing to fit into a world that already loves us.

Let me say that again, just for emphasis: **We are doing all of that stressing to fit into a world that already loves us.**

Have you ever seen the movie *Mean Girls*? The characters in that movie are experts at bullying but making it seem like they're being friendly. The backhanded compliments, the exclusion of other girls, the gossiping? All of these things happen every day in schools and workplaces around the world. Cyberbullying has become a huge problem, so much so that some school systems are launching educational campaigns to help kids understand the damage it can inflict, as well as combat the cruelty. *Mean Girls* is a comedy, but it does shine a light on how girls often

treat each other, as well as how we treat ourselves when we get caught up in that kind of world.

As much as we are guilty of judging ourselves, many of us are also guilty of **comparing**. As a teenager, you look at the girls wearing name brands and those who aren't, or compare your Keds and Target shirts with another's designer labels. Doing that is so dangerous because it sets you up for failure—no matter how much you compare yourself with others, someone else will always have more. Comparing yourself to others steals your joy.

What happens as a result of this kind of judgement is self-loathing. The media only perpetuates this by glorifying people like the Kardashians and giving a lot of air time to tell us which brands are cool and which aren't. Advertising is designed to make you feel like you must have that purse or those shoes in order to live a happy life.

For most of my life, I have never felt good enough for relationships, happiness, or success. I've felt like I didn't measure up because I didn't match some societal "norm". I know I'm not the only woman who has struggled with that; so many of my friends say the same thing. Many people who battle with self-loathing or a sense of inferiority try to control or soothe those feelings with unhealthy choices like eating disorders, addictions, or abusive relationships. We feel like we



deserve this unhealthy treatment instead of standing up for what we deserve.

Women who are not okay with themselves sometimes grow up to become bullies. For some people, tearing others down is the way an insecure person can lift themselves up. It creates a vicious circle of meanness, guilt, lower self-esteem...rinse and repeat.

Adult bullying isn't as easy to see. The name-calling, fighting, and games that kids play aren't as easy to spot in adults because the bullying is more subtle. Behaviors like disregard, arrogance, gossip, spreading lies, and small criticisms, all fall into the bullying category. Adult women can be even more malicious in their bullying, even if it's not as obvious as it is in middle school. Learning how to recognize subtle bullying is key. Is your stomach in knots, are you obsessing about dealings with other people, or are you feeling inferior? Bullying from other people may be the reason.

The first step in dealing with bullying is **awareness**. Recognize that what this person is doing or saying is triggering your insecurities—and then **detach**. Detaching is difficult because we get emotionally wrapped up in what is happening, but *detaching stops the impact of bullying in its tracks*.

Detaching means stepping back and looking at the moment or the other person as if you are an outsider. It means not taking what happened personally (which I know can be hard) but recognizing that the person

who bullied you has some issues, and you're just not going to engage with him or her. If you have trouble doing this, try physically taking a step back from the person so you put physical and then mental space between yourself and their behavior.

Next, **validate** your own feelings in that moment. You are not crazy. Bullies know what they are doing. Remember, they have decades of experience and are quite adept at making you feel bad so they can feel better. Do not take ownership of or responsibility for their nasty behavior; because it is *not your fault*. Bullies are often insecure, broken individuals who enjoy hurting others.

When I stopped judging myself by the standards of others, and instead **embraced** who I really am—quirks and all—the world became a less threatening place. By nature, mermaids don't swim around afraid of what others think of them. They boldly and unapologetically express themselves and explore new territories. A mermaid would say: *If those around you don't appreciate you, swim on.* And that's what I choose to do.

## FINDING YOUR PLACE

For many of us, even as adults, we struggle to find our place in the world. When your **confidence** has taken a lot of blows, it can make it difficult to carve out your own corner. For most of my life, I kept trying to figure

out who I was and how I fit in the world. My career path should have been simple: I got good grades, was a member of the Honors Society in high school, and I should have had the stereotypical path to college and success. But I didn't.

When I was in my junior year of high school, I was promised a financially secure position with a big local company. A man my family knew from church asked me to work for him. I'd be doing some small tasks around the office, he said. He told me not to be concerned with affording, or even attending, college because he would hire me straight out of high school. This seemed like a huge blessing to our family. My parents were retirement age and on a fixed income, so not having to pay for my college education was a massive relief. I believed what he told me, skipped the SATs and the scholarship applications, and went straight to his office after graduating in 1987.

When I got there, I realized he had been lying. He had no say-so in the hiring and, because I had no real experience and no college degree, the company wouldn't even consider me as an employee. This was a devastating blow that completely derailed my self-esteem. Meanwhile, my friends were all leaving for college and I did not have the heart to backtrack and try to go. To admit that I had failed.

I did, however, **resolve** to find my path to success and to not let this setback upset my life for too long. The

problem was that I didn't know what I wanted to be. When I was young, I had dreamed of dozens of jobs—designing cards for Hallmark, being a weather girl, a private eye, an artist, a ballerina, or maybe one of the girls in an MTV video. For a while, I even wanted to be a model on *The Price is Right*. But when I went for a modeling audition, I was turned down because of my height. I was told no one would ever want a 5'3" model. Despite all of the naysayers and the closed doors, I was determined to find my path to success.

So I wandered a bit. I tried to find an area that I loved. I spent the first nine years after high school graduation performing a variety of jobs, from cashier to magician's assistant, receptionist to leg model. Finally, in 1996, I got a job at an insurance company and realized this could be a great path for me. A year later, I obtained my Property and Casualty License and finally found a career I could stay in for life. At the time I accepted this position, I really just wanted a daytime job with some stability. The more I learned about the field and how I could really help people, the more **motivated** I became to excel. Ironically, more than one customer referred to me as a "magician" when finding solutions for them. That made me feel good and fed into my desire to help other people.

## BE YOUR BEST MERMAID

Being female was often a disadvantage in every industry I pursued, so if I let that stop me, then the bullies would win and I'd be defeated. Both men and women judged me or looked at me as someone incapable of achieving my dreams. Modeling, for example, was an "impossible" goal for me because of my height. Yet I didn't let that stop me from pursuing modeling opportunities long after I was in my early twenties.



### *Mermaid:*

masculine merman, a fabled marine creature with the head and upper body of a human being and the tail of a fish. Similar divine or semidivine beings appear in ancient mythologies. In European folklore, mermaids (sometimes called sirens) and mermen were natural beings who, like fairies, had magical and prophetic powers. They loved music and often sang. Though very long-lived, they were mortal and had no souls.

*Source: Encyclopedia Britannica*



As women, we bring so much to the world but we often don't see our own value. When we get knocked

down, it's our duty to pick ourselves up and proceed with **dignity**. We need to be the shining examples that younger ladies need. I look at the mermaids I started drawing as a young girl, and still draw today, and see in them an example of having strength in their **individuality**. I know they are mythical, legendary creatures, but they are also a symbol of being okay with being different—and it truly *is* okay to be different.

You have to learn to be your own best mermaid. Look at the characteristics that make you different from everyone else and *embrace* the differentiators. Use them to carve out a path and a life that is uniquely yours.

Another tool to use is this: Know in your head what **sincerity** and authenticity look like, then use discernment in all situations and relationships. Anything less than realness from other people does not deserve your attention, and it definitely shouldn't cause heartache. Protect your heart. No one else will. Mermaids do this as a way of life because they only stay in situations that make their hearts happy. They don't get trapped in negative bubbles or dark worlds.

For me, the friends I've had since kindergarten stuck with me, and I with them. We're still friends to this day, and they are the ones who have laughed with me, cried with me, and have given me a hug when I needed it most. They are my examples of true friendship. A real friend is the kind who shares her lunch because you forgot yours or offers to walk your dog because a family

member is in the hospital. She is there, no matter what. I try to be that for my friends and am so grateful for all the women who have been true friends to me.

They also supported me when I found out about being adopted and started asking more questions as I got older. When I finally found the answers I had been needing about my adoption, it did help mitigate some of the damage from all those years before. Turned out my answer was practically right next door. When I turned eighteen, my mother finally told me who my birth mother was. I had known my birth mother my whole life as a friend of the family who lived a few hours away.

The first time I remember interacting with her, she was already in her mid-forties. I didn't see the resemblance and later found out that I looked more like my birth father. My birth mother became pregnant when she was forty but she was misdiagnosed with a stomach tumor for the entire first trimester. When she realized she was having a baby, she panicked. It was too late for an abortion and *Roe v. Wade* wasn't decided until about twenty years later. My conception was the result of an affair and she was terrified her husband would find out.

In desperation, she contacted her lifelong friend. My birth mother was suicidal and at the end of her rope because she didn't see a way out of this horrible situation. Her friend begged her not to hurt the baby and promised to raise me as her own. That friend

became my mother, who treated me all my life as if I had been hers from the very start. It was gratifying to know that I had been loved by my birth mother all along, and that my life was as a result of two strong women coming together to do the best and right thing for me. They **empowered** each other through support and friendship.

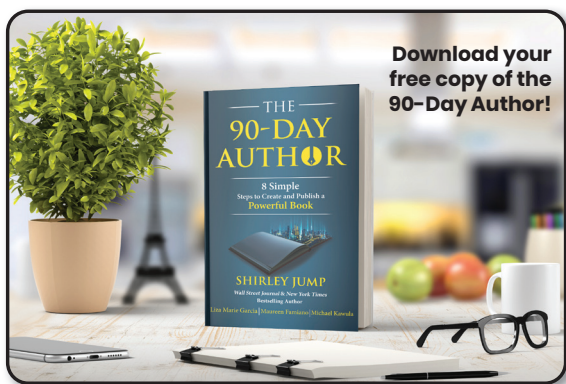
But the biggest lesson I learned in life was to understand who I am through my own eyes. It took years to be able to look at myself without criticism and to see the beauty and value in every part of myself. Too often, we judge ourselves harshly based on the skewed lens through which we view ourselves. It's a lens that is often one that others have conditioned us to use. With perseverance and self-love—things we will talk about in this book—we can overcome the harsh judgments we have learned to impose on ourselves and effectively love others because **we love ourselves**. Be a mermaid and love yourself exactly as you are, even if what you are doesn't fit some predetermined societal norm.



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