



Celine Sparks

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Dedication

*To Mattianne, whose deep
compassion crowded out her stubborn will*

Endorsements

Reading this book is like chatting with an encouraging (and witty!) friend. Every chapter brings us to a crossroads, where Celine offers two opposing reactions to everyday situations. Celine's humor will immediately draw you in, and her warmth and godly wisdom will leave you inspired to step forward in faith. I adore her creative approach to "speaking the truth in love"!

—**Kristin Hicks**, author at The Ruffled Mango online

Celine Sparks has written books and articles, participated on many lectureship programs, and spoken at a number of ladies' days. Her latest book is *If Mama Ain't Happy*. Although designed for ladies, I had the privilege of reading this very fine work. As the title suggests, it is about happiness. You will find it difficult to put this book down after you start reading it. With her great sense of humor, she has produced a volume that is witty, laugh-out-loud funny, and yet, thought-provoking. Her true-to-life illustrations and lessons will greatly benefit all readers.

—**David Lipe**, PhD, retired Bible professor FHU,
author of Commentary on John and other books

If Mama Ain't Happy gives us practical examples of what barriers to biblical happiness may look like in our lives, and it uses humor, personal experience, and knowledge gained from studying God's Word to challenge us to recognize and overcome those barriers. Celine Sparks touches our heartstrings and our funny bones with her teachable-moment stories about potlucks, family photo sessions, grandparents' love, fireworks, and even biscuits in a way like no other to encourage us to live as God intended. Her insights coupled with her guided Bible study are beneficial to women of all ages and all circumstances as we seek and share the joy that can be found in Christ Jesus.

—**Debbie McLaughlin**, Executive Coordinator -
FHU Associates

You know a book is good when you can't wait to tell others all about it. Conviction plus humor is a powerful combination, and *If Mama Ain't Happy* has plenty of both. It's real. It's relatable. And you can't help but come away from this study with a better heart posture.

—**Kathy Pollard**, author of Return to Me

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Introduction

It's been a tough year. Disease has been rampant, the grave has robbed us of some of our youngest and brightest, the physical storms have been ferocious, and divorce has destroyed some of the homes closest to us. I didn't realize I had this many tears.

Yeah, I did just start the first words of this book with a downer, but don't lay it down yet. There's not a tear big enough to drown out the love of God, the comfort of his presence, the understanding that he is working it all for our benefit.

If Mama ain't happy, has she considered the impact of that kind of a relationship? I've heard preachers say that God never promised us happiness. Maybe so. But he told us how to get it, how to maintain it, and how to hold on to it tight when the enemy tries to rob us of it.

The world doesn't have that. Oh they grab at happiness by the big handfuls just to open up empty calloused hands before giving it another try. Real happiness doesn't work that way. Thank God it doesn't work that way!

It resides in the heart and not in the hands. It thrives on trust, it's fortified in trials, and it puts down its roots in resignation of self. It's like the two-year-old on the top of the slide. It's not coming down.

This book explores the decisions we make to arrive at the place we want to be, but at best it's a hem-book. It touches the hem of the garment, and hopefully drives us to examine scripture a little closer, to live life a little better; to get past just the hem.

It's a book about happiness. Oh, you can insist on only calling it joy if you want to play the game of semantics, but I'd rather play the game of Hungry Hungry Hippos. It ends faster and someone wins.

After all, scripture itself says "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding" (Prov. 3:13 NKJV). Let's turn the page and try to do both.



IF MAMA AIN'T HAPPY,
Is She Worried?

Worrying or Casting

Moms worry. We worry about whether or not the seventh grader remembered to put on deodorant before marching with the band on a 103-degree afternoon. We worry that the ninth grader forgot to feed the cat. By the time that eleventh grader rolls around, we can't enjoy the fact that he's out at a nice restaurant for worrying he'll forget to leave a tip on the table. Or what if he leaves too little? Or too much?

Those are the crazy worries. It's not that we worry about something that's not going to happen. But if we're not careful, we'll worry about something that definitely is going to happen and probably already has. Kids are going to handle things like kids handle them, and no worry up front, during, or afterward can change that. I came up with this worry list a while back of some ridiculous things that might seem paramount to some of us at the time.

- When company comes, will a mouse run across the room?
- When I'm vacuuming, will I vacuum up the diamond that fell out of my ring last year?
- When I'm cleaning, will I accidentally mix bleach and ammonia and everyone will die?
- Will I get invited to someone important's house like a state senator or Eli Gold, and then spill my drink all over the fancy tablecloth?
- Or will something fall out of my nose when the hors d'oeuvres are being passed, and it will become one of them?
- And what happens to people when they are voted off the island on a reality TV show? Are they just drifting at sea now?
- Will someone forget to bring two #2 pencils to the ACT test?
- Was I paying attention to the flight attendant when she explained how to remove the seat cushion to make it a flotation device?
- When I'm walking to my car in the parking lot, will I drop my bag that looks like a grocery bag, and everyone will know that I really bought tampons and Preparation H?
- What if my slip falls to my ankles when I am walking down the hall of a grand hotel during the busiest convention of the year?
- What if I drink a forty-four-ounce drink on a road trip and then pass a sign that says "Next exit, forty-nine miles"?
- Was my mother right that when I wear underwear with holes in them and I get blown away in a tornado, I will be really embarrassed when they find me?

Do we worry like that?

Sweating the Small Stuff

There are what we call big worries, and there are little worries. My favorite poet, Shel Silverstein, has a children's poem called *Whatif*, and just after the worries,

“Whatif the fish won’t bite?” and “Whatif the wind tears up my kite?” come these two: “Whatif they start a war? Whatif my parents get divorced?” Quite a range. There’s quite a range between a sandcastle and a seashore, but they’re made up of the same thing.

I once worried that my son who was visiting his cousin on a college campus would go through all his clothes the first day and not have a thing to wear the other days. Or else he would just keep wearing the first thing he had on the entire week and forget about his other clothes altogether. I talked to him about it, but I did more than that. I’m kind of embarrassed to say that I got some masking tape, and labeled each shirt on the inside neck-hole—Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

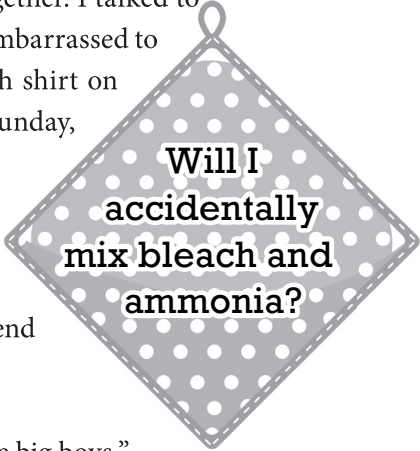
I breathed a sigh of relief when he came home, everything smelled and looked like it had been worn—ketchup stains and all—and I felt a tinge of success. That was up until the time that I saw a friend who had been on the campus that same time.

“I saw Abram on campus about a month ago.”

“Oh yeah, he had a little chance to visit with the big boys.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure what all they were involved in—some kind of game, I guess. I just remember he had his shirt inside out, and he had a piece of tape on his back that said Tuesday. I thought that was kind of strange since it was Saturday.”

Case in point. Kids will be kids. Moms, do what you can, and don’t worry, if it’s not a matter of salvation. We’ve heard it more times than we care to: Don’t sweat the small stuff. But what about the big stuff?



Will I
accidentally
mix bleach and
ammonia?



But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42).

Sweating the Big Stuff

Let me share a case of *worryitis extraordinaire*. We lived in south Mississippi. With four small kids in tow, we decided to take a day off and head to the river. We crossed into Louisiana territory, and just before reaching our destination, we stopped at a gas station, quickly filled up, and then back on the road to the Tangipahoa River. Upon arrival, we parked, began unstrapping kids, unpacking the cooler, answering a lot of questions, and then reached for hands to hold as we strolled down to the waterfront, but we were minus two hands. The one-year-old was there, as were the four-year-old and the seven-year-old, but the five-year-old was nowhere to be seen. Onset of worry. Frenzy of running, calling, and flailing of limbs. Panic had to give way to planning. That was imperative. I would stay at the river, and my husband would make a mad dash back to the gas station.

Look at
the birds
of the air.

We had one cell phone between us in those days, and there was no such thing as data. So I didn't know. I didn't know that when he reached the gas station there was no sign of her. Outside. I didn't know that when he went inside, she was sitting high on the counter with her legs swinging three feet off the floor. I didn't know she was chewing a candy bar and being promised by a team of admirers that we would be back for her.

I didn't know. So I was worried. Was it okay? Was it okay to sweat then, since it was the big stuff I was sweating?

I probably can't make a legal argument for it, but I think so. Here's why. It's a different brand of worry. I was too busy praying, really, to talk myself into fretting. And while I was praying, I was searching. Did anyone see a little girl? Did anyone see any movement in the water? Was there anything tall enough that she could be behind it without my seeing her? Were there small footprints anywhere on the shore? It was the desperate searching of a desperate soul.

The “Don’t Worry” Verses

.....

The first kind of worry, “small stuff” worry—Will my son have enough clothes to wear?—violated the don’t-worry verses more literally than any example I can think of. Turn to Matthew 6:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all (Matt. 6:25–32).

I was worried. I was worried about what he would put on. Shame on me. All it takes is a glance at the meadow to know this is of no consequence whatsoever. It’s against the background of the verses above that a more familiar one emerges next. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (v. 33).

No worries. We sing that verse a lot at devotionals, don’t we? And we can sing “Seek ye first” pretty loud as long as we know, deep down, we really mean second.

The context is your next meal, your next pair of blue jeans, and your next cup of coffee. And Jesus spends a somewhat lengthy oration here addressing the issue. You think he wanted to make it clear to a people who can get really caught up in thinking about life’s essentials? I mean, they’re called essentials for a reason, right?

Peace Over Worry

The real issue here is not really an empty glass or a full glass, but it's about faith. How do you show your faith? How do you strengthen it? How do you solidify it? You don't worry. Even when it comes to putting food on the table, if it interferes in any way with seeking God and his righteousness, don't do it. Wait. What? Don't put food on the table? Are you out of your mind?

No, not yet! But peace over worry is of the even-if and no-matter-what caliber. The Word of God promises us that if we will keep the goal of seeking him first, we can rest assured he's going to do the adding. And God can do the math. When he serves the dinner, you never run out of food (Mark 8:19–20; Exod. 16:35; 1 Kings 17:14–15; 2 Kings 4:3–4). As the psalmist said, “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread” (Ps. 37:25).

These passages do not teach us to have a lackadaisical attitude in the midst of true crisis, but it is reiterated several times in these verses that when it comes to what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, and what you're going to wear, God always has and always will provide for his beloved children. Any time we find ourselves questioning how, it is just a test of our trust in him. Ace the test! Verse 33 is pass or fail.



*The wicked watches for the righteous and seeks to put him to death. The Lord will not abandon him to his power or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial
(Ps. 37:32–33).*

Was Jesus Worried?

But what about that second kind of “big stuff” worry? The one where a child is missing. The gamut of “missing” is a big one. It includes the incident at the river

bank and gas station. It includes the child who is struggling with self. It includes the child who is not quite the same one he was yesterday, whose joy has withdrawn so much the parents are trying to reach deep within him to help retrieve it. The infant and the adult. The one whose health has brought you to your knees or the one whose soul has kept you there. Missing. Lost. It stirs the heart of God in heaven and brings him down to earth. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

If God's heart is stirred this deeply over the lost, don't think it's wrong for yours to be. Yes, it's okay to sweat the big stuff, as long as that sweat is accompanied by prayer, trust, and obedience. I don't intend for this to have the slightest tinge of flippancy, but truly, more vividly than any man-made illustration, Jesus our Savior sweated the big stuff. "And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). His prayer was earnest, more earnest even than it had been before. His trust was full, with his "nevertheless" plea. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (v. 42). He was obedient to death (Phil. 2:8).



*Let not your hearts be troubled, neither
let them be afraid
(John 14:27).*

Troubled Hearts Banned

But even in the face of the big stuff, even in sweat beads, Christ wants a calm for us. Jesus' words to those on the brink of desperation are sweeter than a caramel latte. John 14 begins with "Let not your hearts be troubled." It's enticing advice, but how do we get there? How do we relax a heart that's ready to burst out of the chest in worry? Read on. Jesus doesn't leave us hanging. "You believe in God; believe also in me." That's it. In eight words, we have the entire thesis, discussion, and conclusion. Jesus says something else toward the end of the chapter that's also interesting: "Let not your hearts be troubled" (v. 27). Wait, that was back

in verse 1, right? Right. But he says it twice. That doubles the importance in my mind.

Isn't *twice* significant? Think of how we use it. Did you check to make sure you blew out all the scented candles before leaving the house? Twice. Have you seen the new Batman movie? Twice. Did you stop and get coffee on the way? Twice.

Twice is always a short way of saying, "Oh yes, this is super important to me!" What's super important to Jesus? That his followers not have troubled hearts. Don't get it backwards. We often do. We somehow feel we are more pleasing to God if we stay upset because of the enemy's tactics when in reality Jesus said twice, "Let not your hearts be troubled." And that was with the crucifixion looming in close proximity.

The second "Let not your hearts be troubled" is on the heels of this assurance: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you."

The world's peace is contingent on surrounding circumstances. Christ's peace for his followers is not. We don't wait for the six o'clock news to tell us whether we have peace. We don't base peace on which brother-in-law shows up for Thanksgiving dinner.

And so as I paced the waterfront calling "Mattianne" over the roar of the boats and the chop of the river, it was the desperate search of a desperate soul. Every beat of my heart spelled out, "God help me." I believe there is more reliance than worry in that oneness. The idea that I can have an open conversation with the Helper in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1) and that he cares and hears (Ps. 34:4) expels the worry and brings focus to the situation. I was knocking, I was certainly asking, and you better believe I was seeking (Matt. 7:7).

Things don't always wrap up as neatly as they did at the end of that day. For sure. At least here on earth. Christ's prayer for there to be another way if possible did not take him away from the cross or its cruelty. But the prayer was answered. God's will was done. Praise God! His will was done.

What's super
important to
Jesus?

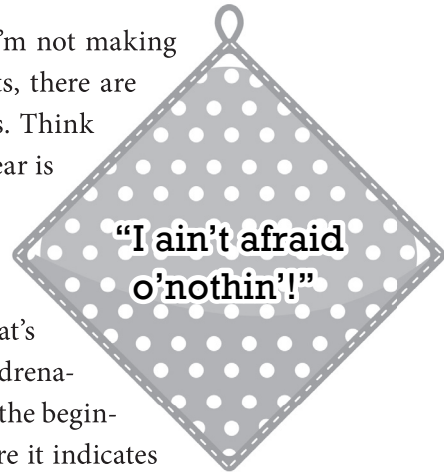
“Do not be anxious about anything,” Philippians 4:6 tells us. I heard the same thing from a five-year-old boy a while back, only he phrased it slightly different: “I ain’t afraid o’nothin’!”

Not so with the world. There are a lot of phobias out there, including anati-daephobia, which is the fear of ducks. As I understand it, this phobia is specifically about the fear that a duck is actually somewhere watching the individual at all times. There is also sidonglobophobia, the fear of cotton balls, and banana-phobia. Figure it out. I’m pretty sure I have a phobia of having any of these words on a spelling test.

As ludicrous as some of these sound, and I’m not making fun of those who are troubled by these thoughts, there are hundreds and hundreds of these irrational fears. Think about it. If you are a child of God, every single fear is an irrational one.

Psalms 46:2 says, “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.” Um, that’s a description of something that might get your adrenaline going just a little. But there’s a “therefore” at the beginning of that sentence, and whatever comes before it indicates the reason for the truth after it. Verse 1: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” For that reason, verse 2. Is the earth about to collapse? Are the mountains packing for a cruise? Bring it! God is a very present help in trouble.

Before Charles Dickens forever married the word “Ebenezer” to Christmas visions that weren’t exactly sugar plums dancing, the name truly meant something precious. In 1 Samuel 7, we read the people were afraid of the Philistines. What? When God was on their side? That was before the thunder. At the sound of the Lord’s thunder, the Philistines broke into confusion, and they were defeated. “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Till now the Lord has helped us.’” Hasn’t he? What are we worried about?



Big stuff, small stuff, in-between stuff. Matthew 6 says we can't do a thing about it. We can't make ourselves a bit taller, though women are notorious for trying. If we can't get a few inches by putting a spike on the heel of our shoes, we'll bouff up our hair until the bride of Frankenstein has nothing on us.

We have to face it. There are some things we just can't help.

Don't worry. Be happy. Ebenezer.



*Casting all your anxieties on him,
because he cares for you
(1 Pet. 5:7).*



If You're Happy, You Will Know It

1. Do you agree with the statement, "If you are a child of God, every single fear is an irrational one"? Why or why not?
2. For fun, look up a list of phobias on the internet. Which ones describe truly fearful situations, and which ones are just imagined danger?
3. Earlier, I failed to say that the five-year-old who said, "I ain't afraid o' nothin'" suddenly had a snake fall from a tree into his path the moment he finished that statement, and he ran off screaming like a fox in mating season. How do we quote scripture concerning being fearless because of faith in God, and then sometimes immediately show a lack of faith when "the snakes begin to fall"? Discuss specific examples either in scripture or in your life.
4. In our society, we sometimes view the helper as a less important assistant to the one who's really in charge. Our God does not fit this concept. A better illustration is a person calling out desperately for help, and when the help comes, it is a qualified responder who makes a rescue, without which the person would not have survived. With that in mind, look for other verses not in this chapter that refer to God as a help or helper. Now look at the context of that name. How desperate are the circumstances?



And speaking of Preparation-H and other over-the-counter solutions . . .

Where would we be without them? I, for one, am glad for the invention of the medicine cabinet because we can quickly access critically needed items such as cotton swabs, lip balm, and the cord to an electric razor no one has seen since 1998.

We do keep a stash of over-the-counters handy just in case they're needed. These meds are located just behind the towels in the linen closet and under the humidifier and heating pad. So in case of an emergency, the infirmed person is heard saying, "Yeah, scoot that thing over, and there's a bottle of Tylenol in that little plastic box with the ... no under that; the green one. Yes, it has a sticker on it that says 'Clinton/Gore,' but never mind now. I think the incubation period has passed, and I'm pretty recovered in here."

To which the searcher responds, "Oh good, whew, I need two of these aspirin after pulling all this stuff out of the linen closet."

It's even harder to find a Band-Aid. The more blood that's flowing, the more difficult the task. My husband showed up to preach one Sunday with a Barbie Band-Aid around his thumb.

Medicines have been a part of life on earth since Eve kept Adam up all night with a coughing fit, but there are basically three schools of thought about them: (1) Take the medicine; (2) Don't take the medicine; (3) Eat tree bark.

And when it comes to schools of thought, that last one is a 7A school with four annexes. Everybody is jumping on the natural healing bandwagon. I have a friend who's all about it. We were eating lunch together one day, and I don't have the greatest focus in conversation anyway. So

we're sitting there eating lunch talking about normal stuff like—I don't know—bad referee calls and even worse fashion trends, when suddenly, with no warning, she pops a dandelion in her mouth, chews it, and swallows. She did. I have no recollection of anything that was said in the conversation after that. All I could think was, "Did you just . . .?"

So as you can imagine, she has a real knack for knowing what natural resources can be used for health benefits. And right now, among those resources, coconut oil is a biggie. I wish I could grow a coconut tree on my patio. I could pay off my house and yours with the proceeds. It's now being used to heal insect bites, indigestion, constipation, warts, and occasional rabies. I'm pretty sure my friend is putting it directly on her armpits to immediately capture and destroy any unexpected sweat.

Some of my girlfriends vow that it enhances memory. It might. I'm not saying it doesn't. In fact, I can't remember what I was saying. Pass the coconut oil.

Oh yeah, so my dad had become a little forgetful in the last few months of his life. Since we didn't think it could hurt and it could possibly help, we were mixing coconut oil into all four food groups. For him, that was root beer, candied orange slices, peanuts, and cheese-flavored chips. Um, now that I just typed that, I'm thinking there might have been a health issue here greater than the memory one.

My sister brought up that maybe we could check into the memory aid that was being advertised on TV. You know, the one that works due to an ingredient originally found in jellyfish? That claim gives me pause. I mean, are jellyfish known for being particularly stellar in the area of memory? Do they say, "Hey, I remember this leg. I stung it back in the Spring Break of 2012"?

I find that, by and large, a lot of people are putting supplements on their supplements, and I guess that's why we need supplemental health insurance. Can't we just go back to the Flintstones vitamins? I mean, those things tasted good, and as long as we were eating them, we could climb three trees and ride our bike around the block all between the time our mother called us for supper and the time she called us by our first,

middle, and last name for supper. We were healthy! So while the medical world is saying coconut oil and elderberry juice and research shows improvement in studies where among males with no prior etcetera, etcetera; I say Yabba Dabba Doo!

Yeah, go with vitamins! Although to be honest, I'm even a little hesitant there. We're entrusting our health to these things produced by people who can't spell or count. I mean there are like twelve B vitamins named riboflavin, folic acid, thiamine, etc. Do you notice something? Not a single one of them start with the letter B. Not one. And most of the time we skip from vitamin B8 to B12. I mean I know 9, 10, and 11 exist, but they don't get a fair shake. Who really ever heard of B11? Who? And K stands for potassium and vitamin H is biotin. There's a B in that word, people. Did it not occur to you when you were deciding who could get in the B clan? I know, I know; it's complex. But it just seems to me that most of the people who are walking the halls of the medical summit never once took a walk down Sesame Street.

Before you badger me too much, let me say I'm for it. I'm all in. Give me natural healing—especially seeing that the date on the medicine bottle was about the time Tennessee won a national championship, some of the medicines out there cost more than my first car, and it's a twenty-minute drive to the pharmacy. With these considerations in mind, there are dandelions shooting up in my front yard, and they are free for the taking.

Originally printed in Christian Woman magazine, January/February 2020.



*IF MAMA AIN'T HAPPY,
Take Her to the Mountain*
~~~~~  
**Circumstances or Substance**  
~~~~~

Six-year-old boys can get away with wearing bright colorful pants on Easter. Not that they want to. They'd much rather have on a Batman cape and a pair of mismatched socks that would slide enough on linoleum to make a grand entrance. But moms tend to push for pretty pants.

I was part of a poll one Easter weekend. A snaggle-toothed boy I had never seen before came up to me and asked if I liked his pastel pink pants. "Oh, I love them," I said, delighted to have been asked.

That was not the result he was hoping for, as he was obviously trying to get the masses to vote against his mom. He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, and looked at my husband. "What about him? Does *he* like them?"

A couple of hours later, we were near a beautiful fountain surrounded by Easter lilies. And mothers with cameras. And tired children in pastel pants. Families were taking turns getting the required picture to post for the world