

Female & Fabulous

5 Keys to Personal Empowerment for Women



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Introduction

“**T**HE SELF IS A FIELD of infinite possibilities,” says Deepak Chopra. But if, after decades of industrial-strength socialization, you see yourself as an object (“I am what you see”) or commodity (“I am what I’m worth on the open market”) as opposed to a once-in-an-eternity incarnation of energy, intelligence, and light, your options will be few. It’s when you really know and appreciate yourself that they expand like the tail feathers of a peacock.

My father was an intimidating man whose right to lay down the law was never questioned. My mother, having once said yes, didn’t really have any choice other than to scurry around for fifty years trying to mollify him. Everywhere I looked, men led and women followed. I was an avid reader of *American Girl*, which was about looking good. I graduated to *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*, which provided advanced instruction on how to be a satisfactory piece of bait. Then I became *really* sophisticated and started reading *Vogue*, which passed off images of scrawny-looking overdressed women doing such things as struggling to keep an intruder from breaking in as fashion photography.

So it won't surprise you that I entered adulthood with some seriously distorted ideas about power. On the one hand, you had power as the use of force; on the other, manipulation. Apparently, I was doomed to embody the latter.

Years, not too many, pass. Come to find out, being obedient, accommodating, and attractive doesn't make for much of a life. Given the advantage of having come of age at the height of the second wave of the women's movement, I started learning how to combine the best of traditional femininity with the technology of self-actualization and leadership. It transformed my life. In this report, I describe the five most crucial steps in that evolution.

Mr. Ryerson, my sixth-grade teacher, used to have these "words to the wise." Here are mine: Don't tackle all these initiatives at once. Pick one and chip away at it until you feel ready to move on to the next. Be patient, which in my experience translates as forgiving, with yourself. We're works in progress. Bear in mind that people are capable of profound change. You're no exception.

Thank you for the gift of your time and attention. Let's plunge in, shall we?



1

Empowered Women are Self-Aware

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you answered a question by saying “I don’t know?”

I don’t mean a “How did World War I start?” kind of question. I mean an inquiry about what you want, what you think, or how you feel.

The first time I was asked to look inside myself, as a young woman at the est training, an educational program that did a wonderful job of bringing people alive, I got steel wool—this nondescript, gray density that stopped me cold.

As a woman in a culture in which girls are raised to please and accommodate and we’re *all* trained to conform to the status quo, what I knew about self-awareness could have fit on the head of a pin.

The less self-aware we are, the less of a basis we have on which to make authentic choices, and the less individuated—truly and uniquely ourselves—we can be. Neither of the alternatives—conforming to whatever the people around us expect from us or rebelling purely for the sake of making a point—ever fulfilled anyone.

Self-awareness begins with the willingness to know who you really are, and can take a while to cultivate. The first step is to take some space for yourself, relax and breathe into your belly, and focus your attention inward. When monkey mind—the tape loop of inconsequential thoughts in your head—kicks in (*It's warm in here...We need milk...Where's that receipt?...*), just notice it and let it go. You'll probably have to do this repeatedly, because monkey mind's a real motor mouth.

What do you notice *under* the chatter, in the silence? Of what thoughts, feelings, sensations, haven't you been aware? If you get steel wool too at first, do it again. Try journaling—writing strictly for your own eyes, without censoring yourself. Or get out into nature, which can deepen your experience. If you keep at it and *still* can't access your inner truth, consider getting some

guidance. That's your internal compass you can't find. Without it you'll be lost.

Once you crack the code, the next step is being big enough to accept whatever you discover. It's there for a reason. Be prepared to wade through some muck before you encounter the stuff that brings you alive. Maybe you'll discover that you hate your job so much, you've got to replace it—that you're dying to tap dance—that you need some time to yourself—or that your neck hurts.

What do you do with this inner knowledge once you have it? Here's what Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, has said:

At any moment, you have a choice, that either leads you closer to your spirit or further away from it.

So take one step in the direction of your truth, and pat yourself on the back.



2

Empowered Women Think for Themselves

I **N 1990, I LIVED IN ATHENS,** Georgia and passed a farm on my way to work. The farmer had a flock of sheep and a sense of humor, judging by the fact that he had one black sheep and a flock of white ones. Driving past one morning, I saw all the white sheep running to the left—and the black sheep heading right.

Precisely what a strong woman must be able to do.

You're probably surrounded by any number of people who'd be perfectly willing to tell you what to do. Years ago, a psychologist by the name of Stanley Milgram demonstrated that relatively few of us have the resources to resist authority. In a series of experiments that could never pass muster with an ethics committee today, most of his subjects administered what they

thought were severe shocks to other subjects because that's what they were told to do.

If you want to be your own person, you have to cultivate the ability to freely make your own choices. Women in particular tend to be so eager to please that we have trouble saying no.

An empowered woman doesn't buy into ideas that contradict what she knows to be true. She's a critical thinker who has learned to trust her gut. She can say no gracefully and tolerate any resultant discomfort. Meantime, she's open-minded. She doesn't reject a new idea just because it makes her uncomfortable. Nor is she defensive.

Being an independent thinker holds tremendous power. Milgram's research demonstrated that the presence of people who refused to go along with an experimenter's order to apply painful shocks reduced compliance dramatically. When we don't cave to social pressure, we empower others to stand strong too. This is how grassroots movements are born.

When you encounter a situation in which you feel pressured to make a choice, experiment with taking the time to get clear on where you really stand and do what feels right. Revisit the issue at a later date and see how you feel about your decision.



3

Empowered Women are Observant

A CLIENT ARRIVED AT MY OFFICE with a book that she opened to a picture that epitomized not only *her* Achilles heel, but that of almost everyone I've ever known. It was a black-and-white drawing of a woman in a long, frilly dress, standing on train tracks with her back to a locomotive that's about to mow her down.

Most of us avoid facing hard truths until right around the time they blow up in our face. It's tempting, when you've already got your hands full, there are all kinds of bright shiny objects competing for your attention, and all you really want to do is have a good day, to rationalize that you can't deal with it. Sooner or later, this almost always backfires.

It takes a lot of discipline to focus on things we find threatening. So without even realizing it, we give our power away and the

situation eventually progresses to the point at which we no longer have any options.

The moment we confront whatever's in front of us is the moment we begin to reclaim our power. This is our point of leverage; our chance to influence, prepare for, or prevent negative outcomes. Facing a challenge head on, we become witnesses to the truth, at which point we have the power to respond as we see fit.

Is there something you're avoiding?

If you were to deal with it with the utmost intentionality, what would you do?

Now take the first logical step in that process.



4

Empowered Women are Courageous

“**W**HEN FEAR DOMINATES, our sense of possibility collapses,” writes meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. Lizard brain takes over and we go into fight or flight—either angrily insisting that things be different or closing down and avoiding the issue altogether. We may experience what Buddhists refer to as “fixated hope,” too stubbornly attached to a specific outcome to accept reality. Either way, we get our heels dug in, and we get stuck there.

“The first lesson of the lion shaman is to counter fear,” says Linda Tucker, author of *Mystery of the White Lions*. The trick is to access a larger sense of who we are and what we’re capable of and use it to sidestep the fear. There’s no one way to do this. Tucker writes about overcoming fear through love, Salzberg about doing it through faith, and Viktor Frankl, the Austrian

psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, about doing it through meaning. How you work with fear depends on both your style and your circumstances. Here's what works for me and many of my clients:

When we experience that collapsed sense of possibility Salzberg describes, we feel helpless and panicky. The solution is to get back in touch with our sense of agency, which is essentially a belief in our own effectiveness.

First, interrupt the pattern by breathing into your belly, getting moving, changing your environment, and doing something else for a while.

Then, when you're more relaxed, remind yourself of your competence and power by remembering your greatest accomplishments.

Cast about for how best to deal with your predicament and, a step at a time, get into action, tweaking as you go.

Focus on achieving your goal and keep channeling your fear into action. If one thing doesn't work, try another. Avoid dwelling on

hopelessness or helplessness. This restores your creativity, resourcefulness, and capacity for genuine hope.

The word “courage” comes from the same root as the French *coeur*, meaning “heart.” When we’re courageous, we’re full of heart, which you’ll experience as a feeling of expansion in your chest. The upside of fear is that when it prompts you to access courage, you can accomplish remarkable things.



5

Empowered Women are Tenacious

IN THE EARLY 90S a couple of men wrote a book that was rejected by 144 publishers. It was accepted by a small publisher in Florida on the 145th try. Today *Chicken Soup for the Soul* is a publishing phenomenon and Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, its authors, can do whatever they please.

Would you have made it to the 145th publisher?

Inspiration's great, when you can get it, but you don't have to be inspired to achieve stirring goals. You have to be persistent. Angela Duckworth, a psychologist who studies competencies other than intelligence that predict achievement, has found that what it comes down to is grit. And grit—the ability to persist in the face of obstacles and disappointments—is the essence of

resilience, which gets my vote for the most valuable quality there is.

Women who are empowered don't give up when they hit a wall; they regroup.

They finish what they start unless they've got a good reason not to. They don't have a bunch of unfinished business lying around, which is critical because loose ends disempower us.

What determines whether we hang in there or not? The more that people believe they can succeed in a given situation—it's called self-efficacy—the more likely they are to persist till they've reached their goal. Fortunately, both grit and self-efficacy can be learned.

If you're having difficulty staying the course, drill down to the ultimate reason that you're doing what you're doing. Then break the project down into the smallest possible sub-goals and take the first step. Continually reminding yourself why you got involved in this thing in the first place, keep at it until you're through.



In a Nutshell

IN A CULTURE that systematically undermines female personhood, women's empowerment is a tricky business. Women hold just 18% of the highest leadership positions, are paid less than men for the same work, and are bombarded by an endless stream of images that trivialize and may even endanger us. All these factors—and more—play on our unconscious.

The media reports that women make 82 cents on the dollar. While this is obviously discriminatory, it appears to be a significant improvement; I remember when it was 55.

But the reality isn't that simple.

White women in the U.S. who work full-time year-round make 82 cents for every dollar white, non-Hispanic men make. Black women typically make 62 cents on the dollar, a gap that hasn't narrowed in the last quarter century. Native American women make 60 cents on the dollar, Latinas 55. Over a 40-year career, that last amounts to a gap of \$1,163,920.

Mothers of all races and ethnicities who work full-time year-round typically make 70 cents on every dollar paid fathers.

All of which precedes the economic impacts of the pandemic, which have disproportionately affected women.

[The National Women's Law Center](#) has broken out a number of additional categories I won't go into in an effort to stay within the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that the data, regardless of how you sort them, are far from equitable.

It's in the context of these systemic challenges that we strive to build a sense of personal authority and chart our own course. So while it falls to each of us to develop ourselves, self-empowerment is as much a political task as it is a personal one. If we want to thrive and ensure that our daughters can thrive too, we must advance as a collective.

The key is appreciating that our power lies in the present, and that we've got an opportunity to claim it right here and now. Each of the qualities I've described—self-awareness, thinking for oneself, awareness of context, courage, and tenacity—can be developed from scratch. As a woman who has gone from

crushing intimidation to liberation, I can tell you that it's a great relief to be on the other side of all that reticence and anxiety. Resignation is the enemy of aliveness.

There's a growing appreciation that the strengths associated with femininity are precisely what's needed to recalibrate a civilization that's seriously out of whack. Women are filling more positions of power each year and stepping out of the shadows to lead groundbreaking initiatives of all kinds. When we do take leadership roles in our communities, corruption diminishes and a cascade of positive outcomes unfolds because we tend to bring with us an ethic of care that was sorely lacking.

I invite you to actively embrace who you are in all your profundity, particularity, and power. As a woman whose life has been a journey from obedience and oppression to liberation, clarity, and empowerment, I'd love to help you navigate the challenges of yours.



Checklist: How to Empower Yourself

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Are you good at pinpointing what you want?
<i>This is about your level of self-awareness.</i> | Yes | No |
| 2. Are you comfortable with the decisions you make?
<i>You must be able to rely on your own decision-making in order to be independent.</i> | Yes | No |
| 3. Do you tackle important issues head on?
<i>Do you deal with challenges proactively?</i> | Yes | No |
| 4. Do you follow through on your intentions in spite of your fearfulness?
<i>Or does fear tend to derail you?</i> | Yes | No |
| 5. Do you finish what you start, regardless of how difficult it turns out to be?
<i>Or do you give up when you hit a roadblock?</i> | Yes | No |

These five questions correspond to the five keys described in this report. If you answered “no” to any of them, those are the issues on which you’ll want to focus.



About Michelle Gale

I'M A LIFE, CAREER, AND LEADERSHIP
coach for women with several coach certifications, a credential from the International Coach Federation, and a doctorate in clinical psychology. My mission is to facilitate women in becoming the strong, accomplished people they're capable of being. Having had an abusive father and a mother of whom he made a doormat, this is territory I know inside out.



I've been facilitating women in stepping into their power and purpose for decades, first as a clinical psychologist and now as a coach. This, in addition to my experience as an entrepreneur, teacher, researcher, writer, activist, publicist, and one of the world's worst secretaries, has given me an abundance of tools with which to help women meet their challenges and transform their lives.

In the best of times, there's a lot to be said for seeking targeted support. At this moment of disruption, confusion, and loss, it makes more sense than ever. If you'd like to take advantage of a complementary session with me, you can contact me at michelle@michellegalephd.com or (470) 377-0730.

I'd love to hear from you.

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