

Transform Your World,
One Small Risk at a Time

spark

Jason Jaggard

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SPARK

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*This book is dedicated to S. J.
May your life always be full of joy. I believe in you.
The best is yet to come. ✨*



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INTRODUCTION

Risky Business



For almost a decade I've been a student of why and how people change. It is said in recovery culture that people change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing. Aside from being really insightful, that's more than a little depressing.

Of course, pain can be a great motivator of change, like when you pull your hand away from a hot stove. But thankfully, pain isn't the *only* reason people change. In fact, many times change can be...well...fun.

Think about some of the choices you've made that brought about change: going to college or getting married or pursuing an internship or traveling overseas or accepting a job offer. It's not likely that you made these or similar decisions because you were in pain.

At least I hope not.

I have friends who went to grad school not because the pain of having an undergraduate degree was so great, but because the pleasure of having a graduate degree was so much greater. Likewise, how would you react if you heard someone say, "I got married because the pain of being alone became too great"?

How romantic.

Or if someone went after his dream job and said in the interview, “I’d like to work here because the pain of working with the bozos in Department C is just too great.”

Um...next.

What I love about life is that people change not only because of pain but very often because of pleasure. They change not only because their current life hurts but also because the future could feel so much better. Sometimes we change not to make something stop but to start something new. And right now, in your life and mine, there are things waiting to be made new. Right now, there is a future out there waiting for you.

And it’s *good*. It’s not a future of endless pain but of fulfilling pleasure. It’s a future not of drudgery but of joy. And it’s worth changing for. It’s worth *risking* for.

You and Me and Life

The best advice I received before I started writing this book was to pick one person that I wanted to write to and write just for that person. I thought a lot about that. I thought about how I could write this book to a friend on the East Coast or a particular family member. I could pick someone of a specific spiritual background or a specific age. Faces flashed in my mind. Whom to pick? Who needs this book the most?

And after all that deliberation, I decided, at long last, to write this book to...myself. (What can I say? I’m a narcissist.)

Let me explain: I *dedicated* this book to someone else when I got done writing it. But I’ve discovered over the past several years that there

are lots of people like me who face the same struggles I face. There are lots of people who experience the same frustrations with life as I do. I don't know anyone better than I know myself, and I wanted to write this book primarily because I needed it. The ideas in this book have changed my life, which is why I'm sharing them with you. My hope is that they'll be as helpful to you as they have been to me.

I Am Not Brad Pitt

Several years ago I was working with a team of college students, and they arranged it so that a group of inner-city kids could come watch a college basketball game with us. Many of these kids had never been outside their neighborhoods, let alone to a real college arena with all the lights and cheering crowds.

During the course of the game, we bought the kids pizza. As I was handing out slices, one little girl tugged on my shirt. I looked down and she looked up and said, "Are you Brad Pitt?"

White people all look the same.

At the risk of stating the obvious: I am not Brad Pitt. Brad is famous and beautiful, and he has opportunities that most of us will never fully understand. This book was not written for him.

This book isn't about how to be famous, nor is it about thrill seeking. It's not about filling the void of our lives with near-death experiences so we can say we've really lived.

This is not a book where a number of naturally likable people tell you how you, too, can become more likable. This isn't one of those books where naturally attractive and athletic people tell you how to

win friends and influence people, make more money, and find awesome success. Nor will natural geniuses explain how you can raise your IQ.

I am a fairly normal guy. I have strengths and weaknesses just like everyone else. I have hopes and dreams and fears and insecurities. I'm responsible for my life, just like you're responsible for your life.

I have never gone skydiving. I have never gone shark diving. Come to think of it, I don't think I've even bobbed for apples. I don't drive a motorcycle or a fast car.

I don't search for thrills, but I do search for life. I want to live a meaningful life, and my guess is you do too.

This book isn't a typical self-help book. It's my attempt to create a road map that leads to a more meaningful life and to challenge you to take the risks required to get there. Starting with chapter 1, I'll be vigorously and joyfully *attacking* some of the most common ways we look at growth, learning, and the tools needed to accomplish both. I'll suggest that we should approach our own growth and learning in a very different, more exciting, and transformative way. And, honestly, the *Spark* approach works better than the others.

Here are some of the questions we'll explore:

- 
- **What** does it look like to create a lifestyle of healthy risk-taking?
 - **Why** do the standard ways that we learn things almost always leave us unchanged?
 - **How** can we learn in different ways so we can more rapidly become who we were meant to be?

As I was writing this book, I had a list that I wrote to remind me why what I was doing was important, and it eventually found its way into this introduction. I wrote it so that when things got tough, whenever I felt like giving up, I could look at the list and be reminded that this conversation matters. It's a list of *because*s.

The list applies to my life, to the message of this book, to my company—Spark Good—and I hope to your life as well. It serves as a manifesto of sorts for all of us who have decided that, finally, we are ready to do what it takes to change our lives and the world around us.

When the process of change takes an unexpected turn and you start to feel discouraged, I invite you to use this list of *because*s to help you stay the course.

I do what I do *because* tonight



- **people feel** more helpless than they truly are;
- **people are** suffering from solvable problems;
- **people are** lonely and desire to know and be known;
- **people have** undeveloped potential;
- **good is** trapped underneath our fear of failure;
- **people are** busy and distracted from the things they truly care about;
- **people have** leadership abilities that are undeveloped;
- **ideas** that could change the world are trapped in our minds;
- **people are** living lives of passivity;
- **people are** bored;
- **people are** anxious and don't know why;
- **people are** restless for a deeper experience of God;
- **people are** drowning in a sea of information;
- **people are** overexposed to boring ideas that become exciting only when they are applied;

- **people's communities** have grown stale and stagnant; and
- **people have** destinies that their wills are not yet able to create.

—The Spark Good Reasons, Summer 2011

This list pretty well sums up why, in 2009, I started creating groups to facilitate healthy risk-taking so people could live more meaningful lives. We call them Spark Groups. Out of these groups have emerged beautiful stories of risk and growth.

In fact, thousands of people could tell their stories in this book. And before long, you can tell your story too. The first risk of all is one that anyone can take: just keep reading.

ONE

Creating Atomic Change



Why small is the new big



Years ago I got to be part of a Q&A with Larry King, where the question was asked: “What makes a great guest for your show?”

“Four things,” he replied. “They have to be articulate, funny, self-deprecating...” And the final thing: “They have to have a chip on their shoulder.”

I love that. People with a chip on their shoulder are interesting. It’s because they believe the world should be a certain way and it’s not. And they’re not afraid to say it. More than that, they think you should care just as passionately as they do about the condition of the world.

When I heard Larry’s answer to the question, I thought, *What’s my chip? What is it that I care about?* Since then I’ve thought a lot about the various chips on my shoulder.

I mean, I have so many!

That’s a joke.

Kind of.

Over the years my chip has become easier to identify. When I started working with the best and brightest students at the university level, I began to notice certain trends. They were talented, smart, attractive, and generally considered good kids. Yet there was something missing.

Many brilliant students lacked fire and drive. They saw themselves as passionate, but they were passionate only in comparison to their more disengaged classmates. That's the problem when you're surrounded by people who are as bright as you are. You begin to think that being bright is normal, and you begin to live a normal life.

Many times when I was on a university campus, I felt like I was surrounded by brand-new Ferraris, able to do zero to sixty in 4.33 seconds, yet content to settle in at twenty-five miles per hour and feeling proud to be moving at all.

This angered me.

It was the one part of my story that was different from theirs. I hadn't gone to one of the best schools in the country. I didn't attend UCLA or USC or Pepperdine or Cal Tech. I'm not particularly good-looking or an especially good person. Yet when I was a junior in college, I sat down with the president of my school and pitched to him the idea of turning our school into a world-renowned center for unleashing human potential.

I hadn't thought much about that moment since it happened more than ten years ago. But as I think about it now, I realize that what I did wasn't, you know, normal.

Still, I met with the college president because I have an almost pathological desire to do something meaningful with my life. My friend Dave Auda once said that when he dies, his only hope is that his body will fall in the right direction so the people behind him know which way to go after he's gone. To Dave, retirement is a myth. It's even worse than a myth; it's a death sentence for committing the crime of apathy against humanity. Dave is going to give until he drops.

I know how he feels. And I want everyone I meet to feel the same way. After working with college students on a number of campuses, I realized what my chip was.

My chip was an empty shoulder. *Anyone's* empty shoulder. The chip on my shoulder—the thing that inspires, frustrates, motivates, angers me—is that there are too many chip-less shoulders in the world. Too many Ferraris with untested engines. Too many humans with untapped potential.

Too many souls full of natural gas...

With.

No.

Spark.

What We Need Most

It is said that seventy-five percent of Americans are chronically dehydrated. And it's interesting that one of the symptoms of chronic dehydration is that you're not thirsty.

Think about that for a second: when you're desperately in need of water, you have no desire for water. Take right now, for instance. Are you thirsty *right now*?

As I write this, I wouldn't say that I'm thirsty. But now that I think about it, I haven't had a glass of water since around eight o'clock last night. My muscles are tight. I feel a little fatigued. My lips are dry. My body is in need of water and yet I don't *feel* thirsty.

Sometimes the things we need most are the things we think we need least. When I was a resident assistant in college, they taught us how to work with students who were depressed. The big secret to helping these students was to get them out of their rooms. Get them up and moving. Get them out among people.

But when you suggest that to a depressed person, she will almost always say she doesn't *want* to. When you're depressed, the *last* thing you want to do is be around people.

Yet it's the best thing for you. The thing you need most is the thing you want least.

Which brings us to the tension we experience when we consider taking a risk. When we started creating Spark Groups all over Los Angeles, we called them "risk groups." Over and over we noticed that people were nervous about participating. When we asked why they weren't interested, they would tell us that *risk* is a scary word. Sadly, these were the people most in need of taking some healthy risks.

That's the thing about risk: it might be exactly what you need, even though you don't sense a need for it. Taking healthy risks is necessary

for all of us, but it's also one of the easiest things to set aside. It's something we think we'll get around to later when there's a more convenient time.

We all need conversations and groups and spaces in our lives to help champion our fragile desire to take the risks we were meant to take. It's not easy to find these spaces because life offers so much resistance. Generally, we encounter four obstacles to the idea of our taking a risk:

1. It's scary.
2. It's lonely.
3. It's negative.
4. It's dangerous.

Let's take a look at each obstacle. First, it's scary. I have to agree with this one. Taking a risk is stepping into the unknown. It's uncomfortable. And while these things are true, risk is also fun, so when we launched Spark Groups, we decided to make the experiences fun.

Second, risk can be lonely. This obstacle is easy to understand. We usually keep our riskiest behavior to ourselves. That way if we fail, no one will know about it. So with Spark Groups, we decided to put risk where it belongs: in the context of community.

Third, risk is widely viewed as a negative thing. Just thinking about risk can cause people to break out in a cold sweat. A common view is that risk involves putting your head in a lion's mouth. And even when we think of risk outside the context of a circus, there are plenty of negative terms that come to mind: *at-risk youth* who engage in *at-risk behaviors* that will, generally, ruin their lives. So with Spark Groups, we encourage only positive risks or what we call healthy risks. A

healthy risk is anything that makes you a better person or the world a better place.

Finally, risk is usually thought of as dangerous. That's an obstacle for a lot of us, and when this objection is raised, we respond, "You got *that* right. Welcome to a more interesting life!"

Overcoming the four common obstacles to risk is the essence of Spark Groups. Spark Groups are social experiences that have been field-tested in more than ten countries and engaged in by more than ten thousand people. Participants have come together at colleges, in corporations, in churches, in youth groups, in inner-city after-school programs, and even at a homeless shelter.

Because the longing for change is universal, there are no limits on who can start a Spark Group or who can participate. It begins with a small group of people who agree to encourage and support one another in an experiment in risk. They further agree to meet together for five weeks as each person takes four risks (one per week) that are guided by this single question: "What's one risk I can take this week to make myself a better person or the world a better place?"

That's when sparks begin to fly.

What Is a Spark?

So what *is* a Spark? A Spark is a choice. A small risk. It's a flash of light that brightens the everyday routine of your life. It's a decision to move from inaction to action.

Oftentimes we can look at our lives—our work, relationships, hobbies, and even our spirituality—and wonder if we'll ever arrive at

where we want to be. Will we ever be as productive as we want? Will we ever be the friend, spouse, parent, son, daughter, boss, or employee that we long to be? Will we love greatly? Will we unleash our full potential? Will we have the impact on our world that we dream of?

These questions can seem daunting, even unrealistic. Our dreams can inspire us, but they also can haunt us. When we were younger, our dreams took us to the stars; they inspired us and drew us into the future. Yet as we got older our dreams began to grow dim. Now we have to pay the rent and get the oil changed and buy new outfits and keep in touch with friends and show up at work. It's not long before we can no longer see the stars: they get lost in the glare of our everyday lives. Yet the stars remain, waiting to be rediscovered. If only we'd take a look.

The reality is we don't know how far we can go in life. We don't know how much good we can create. We can't know for sure which stars in the night sky belong to us. Our destiny, in many ways, always remains a mystery.

And yet...while we can't be sure about how far we can go, we do know this: we're meant to go further than where we are today. We can't deny the urge inside us to be different and to make a difference. We might not be able to reach the sky, but we can step into the opportunities that are right in front of us. We can take risks. We can do the one thing that no one can do for us: take responsibility for our lives and our own progress.

At any given moment progress is only one risk away. We're always one healthy choice away from changing the trajectory of our lives. We don't know our destinies for the next five or ten years, but we know

what's available to us right now, and what we can do next. At any moment we can choose to do something that is different from what we've tried or avoided before.

And just so no one is misled about this, it always involves taking a small risk. Few four-letter words are as threatening as this one. You go out there and take a risk; who knows what might happen? It could blow up in your face. You could make the biggest mistake of your life.

I hear the same cautionary voices you do, and they are the voices that keep us from changing our lives and bringing about change in the world. Many of us prefer driving to flying because if we run out of gas in a car, we can steer it over to the shoulder. Whereas a plane without fuel is headed in only one direction, down. But risk is the stuff of life, the necessary next step, the energy that keeps us alert and alive and trying things. Sure, we never know the end from the beginning, but if we did we'd be bored out of our minds.

Still, the word *risk* can be a little scary. That's the tension: risks are scary but necessary; they're uncomfortable but required to live a meaningful life. To manage this tension we'll focus on small risks. *Spark* isn't necessarily about making radical changes. Often, the best thing to do is something small that will turn into something big later on. And some risks aren't even all that risky when you stop to think about it. They are simply the right thing to do. You do it because not to do it would be wrong. And later on, you realize how big a step it really was.

I have heard the stories of hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have participated in Spark Groups. Again and again I hear a

similar tale: risks that seem small are the ones that can change you forever.

The Power of Atomic Risks

One of my favorite stories to come out of the Spark movement has to do with a big dream and a young woman named Lauren. The first time I met her, she struck me as a quiet person. But she has a subtle power that makes her able to lead. When Lauren joined a Spark Group, she started by taking this risk: to tell a coach at her school that someday she wanted to work with Olympic athletes.

Looking at it from the outside, it doesn't seem like this would be the scariest conversation to have. Okay, coaches can be intimidating, and Lauren's dream was a little like saying, "Hey, Coach, I want to be more successful than you are." Sure, there's that. But she seemed determined to raise the issue, and with this particular coach. So the rest of us were eager to hear how it went.

The next week Lauren came back to the group and told us what happened. She had gone into the coach's office and immediately felt nervous just being there. *What if there's nothing he can do?* she wondered. Eventually she was able to spit out why she came to talk. She didn't mean it to, but it came out like a confession: "I want to be an Olympic trainer someday."

There was silence.

The coach took a deep breath and then said, "Lauren, to even have a chance you'd have to do an internship in Colorado Springs at the US Olympic Training Center."

“And that’s really hard to do.”

Lauren’s spirit sank. She looked down at her hands just as the coach was picking up a phone. He dialed a number and she heard him say, “Hey, Margie! It’s been a long time. How’s Colorado? Yeah. Hey, listen, I’ve got this girl here who needs to come out and do an internship with you this summer.”

He handed the receiver to Lauren.

The next thing she knew, she was at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, networking with some of the most gifted trainers in the world.

Small risk. Atomic results.

When I first heard Lauren’s story, a thought struck me: What could happen in my life, and in your life, if we each chose to take just a little more risk? Not a huge risk, but one that is doable. What if you chose to take a risk this week? What might happen?

What I love about Lauren’s risk is how nondramatic it really was. I mean, all she did was have a conversation. If we had peeked into the office during her meeting, we would have seen a coach behind his desk and a young woman sitting in a chair. There were no fireworks, no sweeping musical score. Just a short conversation, a phone call, and a changed life. The risk was small; the change that followed was huge.

And that’s exactly the point. Life change sneaks up on us. To an outsider it looks like a conversation. But to Lauren it was the start of a new life.

A Movie of Your Life

Life, most of the time, isn't all that dramatic for any of us. Right now I'm typing away at a computer, wearing pajamas and sporting a head of hair that's going everywhere. Later I'll grab lunch with my sister, do some consulting with a high school in Pasadena, volunteer with an after-school program in downtown Los Angeles, then come home and write some more.

It's a good life; I enjoy what I do. But it's just life. And I'm going to guess that your life is also not all that exciting on an everyday basis.

But here is the truth that we often miss: that's where all the *good stuff* is.

I'm all for making life more interesting. That's one thing our company, Spark Good, is all about. In fact, sometimes when I'm traveling and people ask me what I do, I say, "I work with a company that creates an experience to make your life more interesting." It's a great way to begin a fun conversation.

Taking a risk will always make your life more interesting. And you'll find, afterward, that taking a risk, by definition, will change your life in some way. But most of the choices you make are not "film worthy." In other words, the results usually do not warrant a dramatic musical score that swells behind the high suspense. Yet somehow, as you take small risks, it creates a life that *is* worthy. You can add to your highlight reel by choosing to change, and small risks are what get you there.

Over the past few years, as the Spark movement has spread across the country and into other countries, people have reconnected with

estranged parents. People have changed careers and started non-profits. People have changed the way they treat their bodies or their families or their finances or their world.

These make for great stories, and I love to hear them and tell them. But really, most sparks are smaller than that. Most are simply choices to make the week a little less ordinary and a little more beautiful. Sending flowers to a loved one. Going for a job interview and really doing what it takes to make an impression. Taking time to volunteer for a cause. Giving away some money. Extending friendship to someone who previously had escaped your notice.

You have to start somewhere, and starting always involves risk.

The great tragedy of our lives isn't going to be that we took small risks instead of big ones. The great tragedy will be that we took no risks at all. Risks are like exercise—a flexing of the will. When you start an exercise program, the immediate result is sore muscles, stiffness, blisters, and discomfort. You don't experience sudden weight loss or dramatic gains in strength. You have to trust that taking the risk to exercise will result, eventually, in an improved life, better health, and greater well-being.

When you trust that the first step will lead to something good but as yet unseen, you are flexing your ability to let go of outcomes. You are now trusting something greater than yourself. You take a risk, follow through with where it leads, and then start looking for the goodness that it produces. In every instance it involves getting outside your comfort zone to choose something beautiful and out of the ordinary.

At least that's how it started for me.

The First Spark

A few years ago I spoke on “finding your passion” at a leadership conference at Pepperdine University. I was wrapping things up when a thought hit me: I could take a small risk by trying out my ideas about finding your passion—just to see what might happen—or I could simply end my talk. I didn’t have time to think it through, and I knew it could flop. But something about it just felt right...so I went for it.

“Here’s the thing,” I said to the audience. “I don’t know a ton about discovering *your* passion, but I do know that you don’t discover your passion by listening to someone talk about it. You discover your passion by taking risks, by getting outside your comfort zone and seeing what sticks and what doesn’t.

“So,” I continued, “for the next few weeks I’ll drive here to Malibu and we’ll find a time and a place to meet. Every week, each of us will take one risk to either make ourselves better people or the world a better place.”

There wasn’t any magic. No fireworks. Around ten students signed up. But ten was enough for a good experiment, and the following week I hopped in my car to see what would happen. As I drove up the coast, I started getting texts from students saying they weren’t going to make it. Nobody ever calls to reject you. They just text you. Or send an e-mail.

This bummed me out, but hey, when you take a risk, you take a risk. I knew there was no guarantee that the experiment would work.

As I walked up the stairs to our meeting place, I heard what sounded like a party. Just perfect, I thought. It’s going to be me and three other

students trying to make ourselves heard over the noise of a great party taking place across the hall.

Then I walked into the room, and what I saw shocked me. The space was *packed* with students. We didn't have ten show up—we had twenty! Word had spread and people wanted to join in the experiment.

For the next several weeks we had a blast. We didn't really know what we were doing; none of us had tried a thing like this before. But we knew we were on to something.

And Spark Groups were born.

You don't know where a risk will lead, but you go ahead and take the risk and see what happens next. In my case, a company happened next.

Spark Good exists to create cultures that value the role of risk in personal development and to resource groups of people who have decided to band together and take small risks for positive change. I am passionate about helping people cultivate an appetite for healthy risk-taking. It's my conviction that through the act of taking healthy risks you will discover your passion, your thirst for life, and the chip that sits on your shoulder, and that you will become the kind of person you were meant to be.

That's why I wrote this book.

So if you're ready, all you need to do is answer and act on one question: What is one risk I can take this week that either makes me a better person or the world a better place?

Let's get started.