

# Dancing on the River

*Navigating Life's Changes*

MARK SUSNOW

*Foreword by Raz Ingrassi, President and CEO, Hoffman Institute*

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INSPIRE POSSIBILITY MEDIA

## FOREWORD

The image of “Dancing on the River” immediately invites us to imagine a joy in life beyond anything we ever allowed ourselves to believe is possible. Each of us has one or more areas of our lives where deep joy has eluded us. That is exactly where Mark wants us to venture, because something amazing—an impossible joy—awaits us there.

I have enjoyed some fifteen years of friendship with Mark. Many weekends find us hiking together, bantering back and forth as we journey the sacred beauty of the forests, hills and valleys of Marin County, California. Sometimes there are no words. Almost always we are exploring our souls and the mysteries of life.

I have come to know Mark well enough to tell you that he’s got something we all need: a genius for finding the possibility for learning, personal growth and, ultimately, celebration in any situation life hands us, most especially in those unwanted situations we all hope to avoid. Some people, mistaking the teachings in this volume for yet another set of New Age ideas, might not look deeper. But they would miss the very best part. Distilled wisdom is the opposite of simplistic.

Every bit of what is offered here has been learned in response to (frequently severe) life challenges. Whatever didn't work to advance either Mark's life or the lives of the thousands of people with whom he has worked was discarded and is not in this book. What remains here has been refined and thoroughly tested. The knowledge is pure and accessible. It can change your life.

Mark openly shares his personal challenges with us, so we can know he is authentic. He's been there. In his time as a young lawyer he has witnessed the depths of loss, sorrow and misery in people who have badly messed up their lives and hurt others. More than once he represented innocent people who were falsely accused. It is sometimes said that religion is for people afraid of going to hell, and spirituality is for those who've been there. Mark has been there and he is, indeed, a genuinely spiritual man. "Dancing on the River" is a book of practical spirituality.

The river of life is wherever you and I are now. Whether the waters around you are shallow or deep, quiet or raging, all of us are in that river together. And it is also in us. So, as you progress through this important little book listen for what is flowing inside you. Music is happening and when you hear it your body will want to move. Soon you'll be dancing.

Then the true gift of life will be yours. That inner radiance and *joie de vivre* is the real you.

Remember that lovely moment as a child when the training wheels came off and suddenly you found yourself riding your bicycle? "Am I doing this or is it happening to me?" Well, just like that you'll one day soon experience the magic of "Dancing on the River."

You are literally holding the answer in your own hands.  
You've already begun. As Mark would say, "Journey on!"

—Raz Ingrassi, President of the Hoffman Institute  
San Anselmo, California  
April 2010



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have met many authors over the years and the one thing that they all had in common was that the process took much longer than anticipated. I understand why. I first began writing a memoir a few years ago and after completing it, decided not to publish it. Instead, I focused on creating *Dancing on the River, Navigating Life's Changes*, which was inspired by the Letters on Life writings, the evolving body of work that I have created over the last eight years. It's been an amazing journey.

I am grateful for the contributions of the many people involved in the creation of this book. Many of the contributions were in the form of honest feedback; others were in the form of encouragement. Thanks to my wife, Annie, who has always given me her honest opinion. Sometimes I didn't want to hear what she had to say, but she always lent me her ear and inspired me to become a better writer. Thanks to the many others who have been there for me when I have felt stuck. There is Curt Wear, my good friend of many years, who has always taken the time to listen to the many rewrites. And there is Alan Harris, transformational photographer, who showed me with his magical eye how he saw me in this period of my

life. Bethany Argisle and Kat Tyson gave me great feedback in the early phases of the project. Jim Rocklin, Elson Haas, Rick Kozlenko, Liza Ingrassi, Franklin Kaplan, Samia Whitmarsh, Jeannie Campanelli, Slyvi Braathen and my brother Bob, have all taken the time to give me valuable input at various phases of the project.

A special thanks to Raz Ingrassi, Kent Hinesley and Roy Forest who have always encouraged me with their words of wisdom. And to Rick Baskin—you were the sign from the universe that I was on the right path.

And of course there are my many teachers, who have allowed me to be their coach, mentor and friend. I feel honored and privileged. Thanks for opening your hearts and sharing your stories with me.

As to teachers, I keep learning from my children, Josh, Makaela and Savanna. Thank you for being who you are.

I am deeply grateful to my mother Bertille Francisco who gave me the courage to believe in myself. And to my Uncle Sam and Uncle Merv who were always there when I needed them. Thank you.

Then there are those who made this project look like a book. Thank you Joan Kirsner for your insightful editing and challenging me to dig deeper. I like what I discovered. And thank you Joel Friedlander. You also challenged me when I needed to be challenged and kept the project moving forward. Thank you for the creation of the cover design. I love it.

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## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I wrote an article about a river-rafting trip on the Green River in Colorado, where I had a near-death experience. As I was propelled through the rapids, behind the raft, I wasn't sure if I would survive the swifter currents of the river. It wasn't until many years later that I realized the significance of what happened on that trip. I was thirteen at the time.

As I relived this experience, during the writing of this book, I gleaned eight lessons and insights from the river experience, and the river of my life, that have guided me on my life journey. They form the foundation for this book. I truly discovered what it means to be *Dancing on the River*. It's an attitude about how you approach life. It's a belief system that you cultivate. It's a reflection of a life decision that you make to be happy and to enjoy life in this moment. Your enjoyment and appreciation of life is not dependent on what might happen in the future. I haven't always felt this way. It's taken me a while to get here. Some days I feel it more than others. Some days I forget. *Dancing on the River* is the journey of how I have gotten to this place in my life. It's been a process of discovering what beliefs and attitudes were holding me back from

moving forward. It's been a process of discovering spiritual practices and mental disciplines that have supported me in integrating more empowering beliefs and attitudes into my way of thinking. It's been the awakening to a rich inner life that has fulfilled me on many levels. It's been the willingness to face adversity and to be courageous when I needed to be. It's about a leap of faith. It's also a story about others and how they have changed their perception of life. Underlying all of this, is the commitment to developing the life skills and belief systems necessary to face life's challenges.

We are affected by events and circumstances that we have no control over. There are no explanations for many of the things that happen. We struggle with trying to make sense of it. More than ever, the world we live in is changing at an accelerating rate. Navigating these changes, both personally and globally, has become an art form and is the greatest challenge that we all face. It can feel overwhelming at times and can drain us emotionally. But it doesn't have to be that way.

The river of our lives always has been and always will be changing. It's just that we are more aware of it now. During my childhood two dramatic changes occurred which significantly impacted the course of my life. When I was six, I lost my father. This tragic incident changed the whole dynamic of our family and of my childhood. When I was ten, I was taken out of public school and sent to military school for two years.

Most changes that we experience in our lives aren't as dramatic as the ones that I experienced. There are the many changes we go through as we transition through different phases in our lives. Once we leave home, we struggle with satisfying basic needs that previously we took for granted. We search for a life path that we feel will give our life mean-

ing. But as we transition through different phases in our lives, what gave us meaning at one time also changes. The break-up of my brief marriage was the wake-up call that opened me to the path of awakening that I have been on ever since. Meditation and yoga, which have been at the core of my life's unfolding, were the first steps on my journey.

Soon after, I met my wife, Annie. Once we began a family, our lives shifted dramatically. It was only a matter of time until I felt a yearning inside that called for something else. Although I didn't know what that something else was, I made a leap of faith and stopped practicing law. A year later, after much soul searching, I decided to become a life coach.

I love hearing a good story and like to think of myself as a good storyteller. Many stories convey a message and underlying theme which are remembered long after the story was told. The chapters in this book reflect various aspects of my life journey and the stories of some of the people that I have been privileged to get to know from being their life coach. For confidentiality purposes, I have sometimes used a composite to reflect upon their contributions.

In each chapter I explore with you the many insights gleaned from the Green River and the river of my life. I also share with you various tools, techniques and resources that have enabled me to navigate the many changes in my life. To help you with your exploration, at the end of most chapters I present you with an opportunity to reflect upon some of the concepts explored in that chapter. I encourage you to journal. Journaling is a powerful way to deepen your learning, and an opportunity to get to know yourself better. Give yourself a gift by taking the time to reflect upon the insights and concepts explored in each chapter.

I have used a quote to begin each chapter. Many of these were written by other authors and, where known, I attributed to them their contribution. As to the quotes written by myself, I chose not to use an attribution.

It is my sincere hope that after you read this book you will feel empowered to embrace life's changes rather than avoiding or reacting to them. Like most rivers, our lives are constantly changing. So jump in—you're going to get wet anyway. With the proper tools and inner resources that you will be able to access in the various chapters of the book, you'll be more confident that you can navigate these changes successfully and make your life an exciting journey of discovery. These challenges are there to nurture and accelerate your life's unfolding. Avoiding the challenge just delays what you ultimately have to learn.

You're not alone on your quest. There are many fellow travelers who face the same challenges that you do. They wonder about the same things that you think about. We are all in this together. Enjoy the journey.

A PRAYER FOR THE WORLD

See the vision

Be the dream

Live your life

Know who you are

Find the light

Be the beacon that

Lights the way

For others to see

Say the word

That speaks to all of us

Know you will be healed

We who are visionaries

—Visionaries of the dawn

Show the way

Be who you are

Now is the time

Don't wait any longer

We know who you are

Your time is at hand

Take a stand

Take a stand at this moment in time

Join with me

we are one—

One family

Dreaming—hoping for a better world

A world

in which we see each other

as friend rather than foe

As brothers and sisters

rather than our separateness  
A world in which our differences  
inspire us to look deeper  
A world in which we know  
that what we all want is to love and to be loved  
A world in which we all say yes  
Yes to the moment  
Yes to the spirit in all of us  
waiting to be expressed  
Join with me  
Let us see the love in each other  
The love that is all around us in each moment  
Let us say yes to love.  
NAMASTE

*Mark Susnow*

## CHAPTER 1



# FLOWING WITH THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

*When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.*

LAO TZU

When I was thirteen my Uncle Sam took me on a weeklong river-rafting trip, sponsored by the Sierra Club on the Green River, a tributary of the Colorado River. It seems like it was yesterday. Up until that time in my life, I hadn't really been anywhere. I grew up in San Francisco; the extent of my travels were occasional train trips to the Central Valley, to visit with my grandparents. The thought of flying on a plane for the first time seemed not only exciting, but also scary. I had one other consideration, which for a thirteen year old was a big concern. Would I be back in time for my team's game? I was the team's pitcher.

Once I was reassured that I would be back in time, I was ready to go, but still with some reservations. During the flight from San Francisco to Boise, Idaho, I couldn't completely relax. Even so, I was able to overcome my apprehension—until I saw what was next. At that time, Boise had a small airport.

After getting out of the plane, I followed my uncle toward a hangar that housed a few small planes, not much bigger than our car. As I looked up at the little six-seat plane, I hesitated. I gathered up my courage, walked up the few remaining steps and boarded the plane. We flew over the mountains to a town close to our campsite. Once we landed, I was glad to be on the ground.

Already an adventure for a thirteen year old, we climbed onto a flatbed truck and were driven down a long and winding dirt road full of potholes toward the river. Then the truck stopped. I looked at the last obstacle before reaching the river. We got out of the truck and began walking over an old and narrow wooden rickety bridge. From there it was just another hundred yards to our campsite.

I looked around at what would become my home for the next week: the river flowing through the sharp canyon with its incredible sounds and reddish colors and the five rubber rafts, big enough for forty people and supplies. There were 22 adults and 18 kids, including the five guides.

That evening we sat around the fire and got acquainted with each other. Safety and logistics were a big topic of conversation that first night. Because I was so stimulated from the day's journey, I had difficulty falling asleep. At the crack of dawn I woke up. A delicious breakfast was served: hot cereal, bacon and eggs and a hot drink. Before getting into the rafts, we reviewed the safety considerations that we had discussed the night before. We were told that with each passing day the rapids would become more challenging and not to expect the most challenging rapids—Hells Half Mile—until later in the trip. The journey of 72 miles of whitewater raft-

ing through Split Mountain Canyon and Dinosaur National Monument was about to begin. That first day as the current took us downstream, every once in a while I would get out of the raft and play in the water and let the current take me where it would.

That's the way the second day began as I floated alongside the raft. Suddenly I had an ominous feeling. I was not aware of how quickly the character of the river could change. Not only were the currents swifter, the distance between the raft and myself was increasing. Many thoughts raced through my mind, yet time seemed to stop. "I might be smashed by the boulders; I might be sucked under the water and die." There were the yells: "Get in the raft. Get in the raft."

It was too late. As I desperately swam toward the raft, not only did I feel exhausted, I had a sinking feeling that I wasn't going to be able to get back into the raft. More yells: "Stay in the center—Stay in the center," was what I remember hearing and that's where the current was taking me. At the second in time when I knew I was going through the rapids, I stopped resisting and let go and became at one with the path forged over thousands of years by the incredible force of that same river.

At its center, the river surged downstream unimpeded between the boulders. I tried to lean back and keep my feet in front of me, but I was spun around and turned upside down by the shifting whirlpools. Fear, exhilaration and exhaustion consumed me. Before I knew it, I was through the rapids. I was alive and intact. I wasn't smashed by the boulders. I wasn't trapped under the surface of the water. For a second, I had a sense of relief as I rejoiced in the stillness of the river. Then

I noticed that the next series of rapids was approaching and the raft was still ahead of me. I dreaded the thought of going through them again. "Maybe I won't be so lucky, this time." At the moment that I began to feel hopeless, amidst all of the yelling, I saw it! With an extra surge I grabbed the oar my uncle extended and was pulled onto the raft. At that instant, the raft went through the rapids again. In just those few seconds so much had occurred that has dramatically affected my life. A few hours later we reached our campsite. I lay down exhausted.

## CHAPTER 2



# LIFE LESSONS FROM THE RIVER

*When you stand in a river for the second time, is it the  
same river in which you had stood earlier?*

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

On more than a few occasions on that trip over forty years ago, my Uncle Sam said to me, “You’ll think about this trip later in your life. It will affect you in ways you won’t understand.” I think I’m finally grasping what he meant.

Many of the lessons and insights gleaned from the Green River experience are at the core of how I live my life today. It’s been my teacher in many ways. That’s the way it is with many things in our lives. We don’t recognize the significance of a particular experience or meeting until many years later.

Let your river guide you in this changing adventure called life. Let it teach you what is needed to navigate the changing currents with all of their complexities and unexpected moments. To help you on your journey, let me share with you the following insights and practices that have guided me:

1. *Find and live from your center.* That was the message from the Green River. When you are centered and connected to your source, you are connected with the source of everything. That's when you are able to let go, to trust and to flow with what is. When I let go in the river, I became at one with that same energy and power that had forged a path over thousands of years. Even though we live in a fast moving and changing world full of uncertainties and complexities, navigating these changes becomes an exciting journey of discovery. Meditation and yoga have consistently facilitated my connecting with that center.
2. *Get out of your comfort zone.* I could have stayed in the raft and played it safe, but I was curious and adventurous. For most of my adult life my comfort zone had been my law practice and, as a result, I had not yet realized my full potential. On many levels I was getting lazy. Unless I made the career change that I eventually did, it would have been impossible for me to experience the personal freedom and enthusiasm that I enjoy in this period of my life. Getting in the current and flow of life involves risk, but that is what's needed. That's when you are truly dancing on the river.
3. *Learn to let go of resistance.* Resistance is a struggle that makes you tired. That's what I experienced on the Green River. At first, I resisted the current and tried to swim back to the raft. But I became tired from the struggle. At some point in your life, not only do you become tired *from* the struggle, you become tired *of*

the struggle. It doesn't have to be that way. When you allow yourself to flow with what is, you experience a synchronicity that can't be described in words.

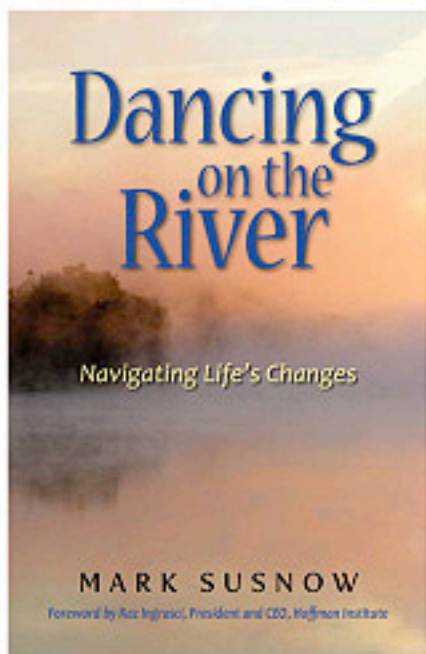
4. *Be prepared.* I wore a life preserver on the river. When you are prepared it is easier to relax and enjoy life's unfolding. Preparation involves nurturing your mind and body, including eating well and exercising. It involves working on yourself and being receptive to new ideas and concepts. In the process of becoming an expanded person, your sense of what is possible in your life also expands. You're more curious and confident that wherever the river takes you, you have the tools and inner resources to swim in the deeper waters and swifter currents.
5. *Be willing to be connected.* You can't do it alone and why would you want to. We all want to feel that we belong and that we are loved. When you allow yourself to be vulnerable by honestly sharing who you are and what matters to you, you create a synergy that is greater than the sum of the individual parts. It is in that moment that you experience the magic of connecting with a kindred soul.
6. *Develop the practice of gratitude.* When the oar is extended, accept it! I am grateful for that oar. I am grateful for my uncle and that I got to go on the trip and experience the river. And I am grateful for my life. You have a lot to be grateful for, more than you realize. When you express gratitude for some of your inner resources, such as your ability to love and to connect with others, you appreciate how much you do have.

You approach life with a grateful heart and greater sense of joy and happiness.

7. *Be curious* Think of your life as a river with its lessons, challenges and complexities. *Being curious* about the changing nature of the river enables you to get to know and sense its many currents. As this knowing emerges, you're more comfortable with *not knowing* where the river is taking you. In the process you become the person you've always wanted to be, fully present with life, and passionate about living.
8. *Embrace the great mystery.* It's unpredictable and you can't figure it out. But you can try and that's what keeps most of us engaged. Like many of you, I have concerns about the future, but I have become more comfortable with *not knowing* the next step. I'm more confident that wherever the currents take me, I'll be able to flow with them. Whether the river is "calm" or "raging," it's still the same river. There always will be difficult moments from time to time, which we won't be able to avoid. After all we're human. But quite often what happens is that these difficult moments affect our ability to enjoy ourselves at other times. After having danced on the river for some time, we know that no matter what is happening in our lives, we always have a choice as how we experience it—one big struggle or an exciting journey of discovery. I chose to play in the river. It is my hope that after you finish reading this book, you will make the same choice.

A familiar theme of this book is that we learn from each other. Before exploring the lessons and insights from the river

in more detail, let me share with you some of the different phases from my life journey, so that you have a better sense of how I have chosen to dance on the river and navigate life's changes.



**Order a copy of *Dancing On The River*.**

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