

The Soul of Uncertainty

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First edition

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To my brother, Robert Susnow

Thanks for always being there
when it mattered.

Advance Praise

"An unlikely hero meets a modern-day mystic who entices him to step into the greater mystery of life. In reading this story, you'll feel called to do the very same thing."

—**JOHN GRAY**, *New York Times* Best-selling Author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*

"Captivating! Let *The Soul of Uncertainty* be your guiding light as you travel through a world of wonder and mystery."

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“In the spirit of *Don Juan's* apprentice and Hesse's *Siddhartha*, a mysterious modern-day mystic mentors his disciple through initiatory rites of passage, at times painful and at other times exhilarating, all conducive to his path toward enlightenment and toward wisdom to be passed onto humanity at large. A contemporary Bodhisattva, in the parlance of Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*.”

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“Transformative! A profound journey of discovery! Let *The Soul of Uncertainty* help light the way.”

—**DEA SHANDERA**, Former Exec. VP, MGM World-Wide Television

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—**BENNETT JOHNSON**, CEO, Laflife.com

“A fascinating journey of discovering life’s guidelines and unfolding spiritual truths.”

—**DR. ROY FOREST**, Chiropractor, Philanthropist, Musician, and Artist

“Thank you! A Gift of Insight! A captivating story of an imperfect man traveling through life in an imperfect world.”

—**GALE GLASSER, ACH**, Teacher, Creator of Bestselling Hypnosis Audiobook

“This captivating and courageous story about one man’s journey to greater self-knowledge was an inspiration to me on my own life journey. I saw a part of myself in his search for meaning.”

—**KURT SHAVER**, Speaker and Peak Performance Mindset Coach

“Mark Susnow has written a most captivating and thoughtful chronicle that demonstrates a profound ability to transform life challenges into deep wisdom. Wherever you are on your path, let this book be a wonderful companion.”

—**MARIANNE STEFANCIC, LMFT**, Marriage and Family Therapist

“A long-time friend and man with soul. This book and his previous one, *Dancing on the River*, are inspirations and guides for those who wish to improve their lives.”

—**ELSON HAAS, MD**, Author and Medical Director, PMCM

“A reminder that we live in a world of possibilities. We follow the journey of an unlikely hero who meets a mysterious guide, often appearing when least expected but always at the right time, to guide him toward fulfilling his destiny and discovering his soul’s purpose.”

—**LINDA COUNTY**, Tour Planner/Leader, Spiritual Cultural Journeys

The Soul of Uncertainty

A FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

By Mark Susnow

Inspire Possibility Media
Marin County, California

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the new millennium, a whole new world opened up to me. I transitioned from a long career as a trial lawyer into what I am doing now, life coaching. Since then, in the everyday flow of life, I've had the privilege of working with many amazing people who have invited me into their lives and shared with me their hopes, their concerns, and their dreams.

If there is a theme underlying the journey captured on these pages, it is the challenge all of us face — to find peace in the midst of uncertainty.

The edge of uncertainty each of us feels on a daily basis begins in childhood and pervades everything we do, keeping many of us up late at night. How we come to terms with this uncertainty determines our experience of life.

As our lives continue to evolve and unfold, we find that there are many unanswerable questions and mysteries, which have a way of resurfacing as we explore new horizons. While at times we are pleasantly surprised, at other times we are knocked to our knees.

During this unfolding, we discover how amazingly resilient we are. We also uncover new insights as we explore the mystery of life's unknown seas.

For many, at the top of the list of recurring questions are, "Am I good enough?" and "Do I have what it takes?"

Very few of us live our lives without wondering what our purpose is for being here. We wonder about God,

whatever that means to us. We experience many uncertainties around the quest to find love — both intrigued and confused by its many mysteries.

Although there are no hard and fast answers to this inquiry, it is a worthy exploration — overflowing though it is with the loose ends and lack of certainty that contribute to the richness of life.

What emerges is a new paradigm about living. Waking up each day — excited, with a smile on your face — even in the midst of all of life's loose ends and uncertainty — is what real success is. In this paradigm, the shift from the physical world of accomplishment and achievement to the inner world of being and wonder has the potential to transform your relationship to life itself.

It was while living on the island of Kauai that this inner world of being and wonder grew into a major part of my life. Although my circumstances kept changing and evolving, loaded as they were with many uncertainties, mother nature helped me to perceive these transitions in a new way. In the midst of a storm, I looked up into the sky and knew that I would see the sun somewhere hidden in the clouds and the darkness, trying to peek through. It was then that I looked for the rainbow I knew would be there.

And that became my life. In the midst of all of the piles of loose ends and tangled uncertainties, I knew there would be possibilities, opportunities, and rainbows waiting for me to discover.

Many books have already been written exploring uncertainty. I didn't want to write another version of a "how to" book; instead, I have chosen to weave a story exploring

this vast and complex mystery. Stories seem to have a way of inspiring and teaching us, often producing a more profound and lasting impact.

This endeavor has been inspired by many events from my own life. With the advantage of hindsight, I am now able to see how they all fit together. I have taken the liberty to transform these events into teachable moments and meaningful lessons.

This story has been, is — and always will be — a novel journey and spiritual adventure. Most adventures have a hero. So does this one.

Hang on, because it will be quite a journey.

A hero's journey — the hero hidden in all of us.

PROLOGUE

A grandfather asked his grandson if he wanted to go fishing.

The grandson commented that the last two times they went fishing, they didn't catch any fish. He wanted to know whether this time it would be different.

The grandfather replied, "You won't know unless you go. Life is like that. You don't know how it's going to turn out until you do what you are here to do. And besides, fishing is not only about catching fish."

"Then what is it about?"

"Let me tell you a story."

"Will it have a happy ending?"

"That's up to you."



PART ONE

— PREPARATION —

Chapter 1 MEET OUR HERO

Growing up is losing some illusions in order to acquire others.

—Virginia Woolf

M **meet our hero. That's me.** I guess in some ways we're all heroes, although it sure doesn't seem that way in the beginning. In our own ways, we all have led heroic lives.

My parents gave me the name Roderick, although I never really liked it. Actually, my full name was Roderick Bartholomew McPherson III, which I disliked even more. I won't try to tell you everything that happened because that would take forever.

Some things stick out in your mind that you think are important. They might not be. There were two moments I've never forgotten that have had a deep effect on who I am today.

The first was when my father died.

He had just returned home from the army. Although I have very few memories of him, my favorite was riding the little red scooter, the one he got me for my sixth birthday, while wearing his full-brimmed army hat, which was bigger than my face.

And then there was that morning, the one I've never forgotten. I was six at the time. Some friends of my parents came into my room and told me the tragic news; my father had just died, and they were going to take me to the zoo.

Tears did not come. What did it mean that my father died? I was going to the zoo. The first thing I wanted to know was when I would see him again. After a few weeks of asking, “When will I see Daddy again?” I knew that I wouldn’t.

Then the tears came, like a faucet you can’t turn off.

A confusing time — trying to understand “why” he died — an impossible task. Why my father? Could we survive? Who would be there to take me to a game? Who would be there to play catch with me?

I thought about God, whom my religious grandparents fervently believed in. It sure didn’t seem to do them any good. Why, if there was a God, did my father have to die? Do we really know the answer? Does anyone know?

I learned about the importance of family. We came together, grieved, and attempted to go on, eventually moving into another house. There were my mother, my baby brother Bobby, my aunt and uncle, and me. When I asked the older people, including my mother, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, why these things happened, I never could get a good answer, probably because they really didn’t know themselves.

That’s what it seemed like, anyway.

Then it sunk in. There were many things that they didn’t know. Not being able to know the ‘why’ frustrated them; it reminded them of their own struggles — perhaps the biggest one being their struggles with the uncertainty of life, the ‘not knowing’ how it was all going to turn out.

Her entire world now upside down, my mother continued to grieve. She hadn’t wanted much more from

life than to be a good wife and mother. Like most mothers, she hoped that her children would be happy. Of course, she had her own ideas about what that happiness should look like.

Then she came down with rheumatic fever, and we moved in with my grandparents for the rest of the year. It took her a long time to recover from my father's passing and her related illness, but she did.

There is a Buddhist teaching that states, "Out of the mud grows a lotus." In her own way, my mother gave me the gift of the lotus, one of the most beautiful flowers in existence.

"Honey, you might want to think about a hobby, like playing a musical instrument. It's something you can enjoy most of your life," she said.

And I have.

Soon she enrolled me in a music class, and I began playing the clarinet. That lotus, inspired by the spirit of the music, has been the gift in my life that keeps on giving: magical moments in diverse cultural settings — inspiration when my spirit needs a lift — and sometimes a song that comes to me that I am moved to sing.

More was continuously being revealed. Buried deep in the mud of pain, sadness, and sometimes hopelessness, another lotus, just as beautiful and profound, but with different texture and color, in the form of resilience and resourcefulness, emerged out of the darkness. It was this lotus that enabled me to move on with my life.

Then there was the second event. When you lose a parent at a young age, it's not unusual to act out. My way of acting out was having more than my share of altercations

with the other kids in school.

Eventually the grownups decided to send me away to military school. I didn't exactly know what a military school was, except that it was a place I didn't want to go. Why was I being sent away? All I was told was that it wouldn't be for long. What did 'not for long' mean? Did it mean tomorrow, the weekend? I was ten.

Coming from the city, I saw for the first time big redwood trees surrounding a circular drive, with four buildings nestled among them. One of those buildings, much like a dormitory, would become my home for the next two years.

On each side of a narrow hallway, there were rooms not much bigger than a closet with a little bed, a table, and a small cupboard for our meager belongings. Each dormitory had a housemother who tried to keep the peace among thirty boys of varying ages and cultures. And then there were those drab green military uniforms we had to wear daily. I wasn't the only one who hated them.

For the parades on the Sundays when our families would visit, we dressed up in our spiffy blue uniforms. The preparation for this day involved shining our shoes and polishing the brass on our uniforms. The setting was rather pleasant, an abundance of oak and redwood trees for climbing and play, although at that age, I hardly noticed.

Playing clarinet in the marching band during the parades was the highlight of my week.

Now that you know about the setting, let me tell you what went on during the day. Two hundred boys from different cultures and of different ages, all thrown together,

had one thing in common: none of us wanted to be there. We walked around angry, with chips on our shoulders, and tempers flared. What was worse was there was no one to hug you or to talk to. No one to say, “I love you,” or “Good job!” Or even, “It’s OK.”

They say that how you respond to crisis in the worst of circumstances builds character. I would get plenty of chances to build my character, soon learning about bullies — which was scary because there was no one to protect me, especially from people like Manuel.

Manuel was one of those bullies — he made us younger kids make his bed so he could pass inspection. Every morning, the housemother would inspect our rooms to make sure the beds were made to perfection. She would drop a silver dollar on each bed, and if it didn’t bounce, we didn’t pass.

A little older and bigger than most of us Manuel seemed to have found some favor with her. Not only were we afraid to say anything because Manuel would beat us up if we did, we didn’t think it would do us any good. The ‘we’ were Max and Luigi, my best friends at the time, and me. They were actually my first best friends. Affectionately calling each other pal and buddy gave us a feeling we weren’t alone.

But up against Manuel, we felt helpless.

That was about to change. I was gifted athletically: Not only could I play football and excel against the older kids, I was fearless. One day, we were playing marbles by the redwood tree, the one with the trunk as big as a car, when Manuel pushed me and took my marbles and then took Max’s and Luigi’s. Marbles is a simple game, essentially

rolling the marble into a hole from a distance. You win by getting your marble into the hole before the other person rolls his into the hole. Like I said, it was straightforward, although you had to know the spots on the ground that could change the course of your roll.

I had beaten Manuel fair and square, but he didn't like losing; bullies never do.

This had been going on for a few months. When I told my mother about Manuel's taking our marbles and beating us up, she told me to fight back, even though fighting was what had gotten me there in the first place.

So the next time it happened, I did push back, and a struggle ensued. The altercation grabbed the attention of Lieutenant Kutz, who broke it up immediately and took us to the gym to 'work it out.' He put boxing gloves on the both of us and then asked if we wanted to continue working it out, which meant that one of us would have to say, "I'm sorry." And I wasn't gonna say that. And bullies usually don't want to work it out unless they're facing a bigger bully.

Even though Manuel was much bigger than me, I was so mad that I didn't care. Plus, I had a rooting section of other kids also bullied by Manuel, who had followed us into the gym. I wasn't just fighting for me, I was fighting for Max and Luigi and the other kids.

Then it started. With a smirk on his face, Manuel looked down at me and clenched his fist. He didn't think I had a chance. I don't think anyone thought I did. But he had underestimated me. Even though I was afraid, there was no turning back. I was faster than he was, and, in my own way, stronger, although I didn't know my own power at

the time. When I heard the yells from my rooting section, Max and Luigi and a few other kids, I had a sense I was invincible. “C’mon on Buddy, c’mon on Bud,” they yelled, “C’mon on pal, you can do it.”

As it turned out, Manuel was the one who didn’t have a chance. Finally he quit. That’s what bullies often do when you stand up to them.

That was the last time he bothered any of us. I have to admit that that moment was one of my fondest memories of military school — perhaps even a defining moment. My standing up to the bully had made it better for all of us. I liked the feeling of making it better for others, and the desire to do that has never left me.

Two years went by, and it was time to return home. My mother was getting remarried. I was so excited. I remember telling Colonel Dennis, practically yelling, “I’m going home! I’m going to have a father again!”

Coming home, I was a different boy from the one who had left, a confident me about to meet his new father. Certainly standing up to Manuel had helped. With that new feeling, I went home to my mother and Pete, my new father; someone to play catch with.

Although I had hopes that Pete would become a father to me, that hope only lasted until I met him.

Alone again. No smiles. There weren’t going to be hugs, either. We certainly weren’t going to be able to play catch.

His obesity prevented him from moving around — and he didn’t talk much.

Maybe I was looking in the wrong place for that hero, that savior. Perhaps the hero I was seeking wasn’t inside

someone else, but inside of me. After getting over my disappointment, I was ready for what would come next. With an inner confidence — a confidence molded by a self-reliance, a resourcefulness and a resilience I could count on, I courageously moved forward with my life. A month after I returned home, I learned a life-affirming lesson, although at the time I didn't realize its significance.

There were going to be tryouts for the Little League baseball team, sponsored by the city's professional team, the San Francisco Seals. The morning of the tryouts, I pumped up the worn tires on my bike, put my mitt in the front basket, and began peddling toward the section of Golden Gate Park where the tryouts would take place. Underneath the tall pine trees was a carefully-groomed baseball field.

By the time I arrived, hundreds of other boys were there already, some with their parents present and others, like me, with just their mitts and bikes. Some of them already knew each other and were playing catch, while others just stood around. I sized everybody up, wondering if I was good enough.

The only position I wanted to play was pitcher. As I marched toward Greg, the adult standing on the raised pitchers' mound, you would have thought that Max and Luigi were marching with me and whispering in my ear, "C'mon Buddy, tell him you want to be the pitcher."

So I looked up at Greg and told him, "I want to be the pitcher." He looked down at me and responded, "What's your name, kid?" I hesitated and then for the first time in

my life, said “Buddy.” From that moment on, that’s the name I went by.

“Well, Buddy, I’m going to do the pitching. We want to see how all of the kids can hit and field and then choose the pitcher from the kids that make the cut.”

Although that made sense, it wasn’t what I wanted to hear. Of course I wondered if I would make the cut. But I wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer and replied: “Let me pitch, let me pitch, I’m left-handed,” as if that should be the deciding factor.

Greg stood there looking at me and then gave me the ball, “Show me what you got, kid.” My big chance — feeling both excited and nervous, I threw the first pitch over the head of the kid that was at bat. The next pitch hit the ground before it hit the plate. Then the next pitch hit the batter.

I was blowing my big chance. I felt the pressure. After about ten pitches, everyone knew I couldn’t get the ball over the plate, and Greg took the ball from me. I felt dejected. I wasn’t good enough. I had failed. I was a failure.

A few minutes later, holding back tears, I got back on my bike and rode home.

Chapter 2 MOVING ON

And the danger is that in this move toward new horizons and far directions, I may lose what I have now, and not find anything except loneliness.

—Sylvia Plath

For the next six years I continued living with my mom and step-dad, Pete, and my little brother Bobby. Then one day I felt ready, ready to leave home, not unlike many young people at that age, which also happened to be the same time I got my driver's license and graduated from high school.

I packed up my sparse belongings, which included a pair of jeans, a torn sweater, and some undergarments, and threw them into the trunk of the old light green Volvo I had just bought with my entire life savings, which I had earned from playing music.

Of course I didn't go anywhere without my guitar and my trusty dog, Miranda, an old English sheep dog. With her fluffy gray and white coat, Miranda reminded me of a big teddy bear.

Then there were the good-byes I had been avoiding. I didn't know how to say it, other than "I'm leaving home." So that's what I said. "Mom, I'm leaving."

My mother knew something was up. When I told her I was moving out and moving on, her main concern seemed to be that I would have some money for food and a place to stay. She also made me promise that I would go to college — which was part of my long-range plan anyway.

My life's adventure was about to unfold in ways I hadn't yet imagined. I drove north for most of the day, toward Redway, a small town in Northern California, until tiredness told me it was time to make camp. Following the signs, I took an exit off the highway and drove down a bumpy, pothole-filled dirt road that continued to narrow. Eventually I came to its end at a cluster of fir trees. Climbing out of the car, I heard the sound of rushing water.

As I walked toward the sound of the water, I noticed a big boulder, almost as big as my car. The way the colors — colors you would see in the most vibrant rainbows — reflected off the granite boulder with its quartz, mica, and feldspar minerals brilliantly radiating light, flooded my consciousness. I'd never experienced anything like that before.

The sun began to set; time to make camp. I noticed a clearing underneath a massive redwood tree with a lush understory of sorrel and sword ferns. A few scattered logs offered a natural sitting area and provided room for my sleeping bag. I gathered dry pine needles and small branches for a fire to create some warmth for the evening.

As I sat gazing into the glow of the fire, I strummed my guitar and sang whatever came to me. Words, phrases, and sounds moved my soul, while Miranda's occasional howls reflected the deep call of the night. The lonely feeling I carried with me when I first began the trip morphed into a sense of adventure.

Looking up at the brilliant twinkling stars and the sliver of the new moon, I felt an energy that let me know I wasn't alone in this vast mysterious universe. Falling asleep, I wondered about the nature of that presence I was feeling.