

Note: This is the introduction and first chapter of *Dancing with Change: Embracing Change for a Purposeful Life* by Ed Stephens, revisions and developmental editing by Ken Walker. Released Dec. 1, 2025 by Dream Releaser Publishing.

Introduction

Dancing. It inspires, expresses, relaxes, refreshes, de-stresses, exercises, relieves anxiety, and creates friendships with others in our orbit. Dancing can exhilarate, motivate, and help us appreciate life. Whether you attribute it to humanity or divinity, dancing is creativity on display. The kind that can drive people to new heights, dazzle naysayers who never believed something could happen, and lead to triumphs that stagger the imagination.

However, dancing can also introduce pressure into our lives, especially when it involves change. By its very nature, dancing means change. You may be dancing alone, or with another person, or in a group of several people. You may be dancing in a line, a circle, or a square. Sometimes it will be a slow dance, other times a moderate pace. When you envision a dance, it may be all over the place, but skill in dancing is a metaphor for life.

The ability to progress and move forward has everything to do with your ability to shift, move, and smoothly transition to the next occupation, geographic location, or stage in life. Since events, circumstances, and upheavals can produce change in the blink of an eye and quite unexpectedly, timing is a critical piece in understanding this process. We must understand that the point is not just dancing. We need to appreciate how dancing will change us in a way that enhances our capacity for growth and adaptation.

In this book, I will draw on the imagery of dance, as well as such disciplines as psychology, philosophy, and spirituality. My purpose is to discuss how we can meet the challenges of change with the same enthusiasm and optimism we take to the dance floor. *Dancing With Change* weaves a tapestry of wisdom that illuminates the path toward living authentically and embracing uncertainty with open arms. This book will remind us that even in times of turbulence—as personified by the headlines of war, conflict, and protests raging across the world today—there exists an inherent balance and beauty—qualities that can be discovered in surrendering to the dance of change.

As we dive deeper into these pages, we will discover the art of letting go of the old while making space for the new and finding harmony in the perpetual movement of life. This book can become a trusted companion, guiding us through times of transition and helping us uncover the hidden opportunities that change presents.

I have battled through loss, adversity, and opposition in my life, but the scripture that I call my theme verse is the reason I remain confident about the future and can dance any step with change as my partner. It is found at the top of each chapter: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). I also like the verse that follows: “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (v. 21). Those words form the foundation for my belief in the power of God that goes beyond human expectations. They express why I have faith in the future and our ability to adapt to whatever bewildering circumstances that changing times, technologies, or controversies thrust upon us.

Dancing With Change is a celebration of the human spirit's remarkable capacity for growth and adaptation. It will empower us to shed the fear of the unknown and embrace change as an ally on our journey of self-discovery and personal fulfillment.

Ultimately, this book serves as an invitation: an invitation to join the dance, let go of rigidity, and embrace the profound beauty that lies within the ever-changing landscape of life. With every step we take, we draw closer to a life of purpose, authenticity, and a deeper connection to the wondrous rhythms that surround us. So, let's take this transformative journey together as we learn to dance with change and create a life of boundless possibilities and profound joy.

Chapter 1

FINDING STABILITY IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

*"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask
or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."*

—Ephesians 3:20

SUCCESSFUL CHANGE

I learned early in life about the need to develop resiliency and intestinal fortitude to make it through change, no matter what comes your way. I was just twelve years old when the first dramatic, life-altering, earth-shattering crisis of my existence struck me like a hurricane: the death of my father. Ed Stephens Sr. was my rock, my role model, my mentor, my provider, and my inspiration. He vanished at the young age of thirty-nine in a car accident while on his way to perform a wedding. It was one of the many services he performed as pastor of Oak Grove Baptist Church in Bartlett, Tennessee, a suburb of Memphis.

Dad was more than a pastor. He was also the director of a community action agency that helped underprivileged residents, many of whom received government commodities and other support. In my earlier days, he had been a postal carrier; I still remember the school function when he came to watch me perform while wearing his uniform. As soon as the program ended, he returned to his mail route. His example was why I rarely missed a school performance, sports game, or other activities of my three sons when they were growing up.

The exact details of that Saturday afternoon are still a bit hazy. A batch of my first cousins was visiting that weekend from Huntsville, Alabama, about three and a half hours east of Bartlett. My brother and I had gone to see a movie with all of them. Afterward, the older cousin who drove us there told me there had been an accident, but he didn't know any details. Around 5 p.m., a deacon from our church showed up to relate the tragic news to my mother. The days that followed brought unspeakable grief. I wandered through visitation, the funeral, and the shock of losing Dad in a state that I call "numb-ified."

Despite the pain, I don't remember shedding a tear or engaging in any heart-wrenching, emotional discussion with my mother, relatives, or friends. Nearly a decade later, in my early twenties as I talked with my fiancé about that accident, a dam burst. I started crying and couldn't stop. Like so many men tend to do, I had anesthetized the pain to keep moving forward. But that

day, I felt a release to talk about it to a depth that I never knew was there. I finally could express my sorrow over the deep loss and the huge hole Dad's departure left in my life.

SUSTAINING INFLUENCE

In the years that followed my father's death, God sustained me. While I certainly ached for my father's presence, I never felt like I was without a relationship with God because of my experience when I accepted Christ. I knew the hand of God was on me. It was up to me to grow and experience and learn more about that relationship.

As time passed, I developed a deeper appreciation for my father's continuing influence in my life. He played a major role in my understanding of excellence. I saw how he handled us as children and tried to provide for us the best he could. He was a great role model of fatherhood, always being there and taking care of my mother, never backhanding her like some fathers I heard about. I learned from him how a gentleman dressed. Suits and ties are no longer fashionable with those in my children's generation, but it's tough for me to discard them. (I accept their ways just as I expect them to respect mine.)

I've shared the story about my father's death and the aftermath many times, particularly how I finally broke during that conversation with my fiancé (now my wife). It has especially helped men who so often don't know how to process pain. They just "numb-ify" and keep on rolling, without ever releasing the agony and pain that builds up over time like a pressure cooker. But what we don't feel we can't heal.

That's part of the dance of change and moving to the next level. Quite often people don't want to deal with their feelings. It's too painful, so they do their best to circumvent them. But if you're going to have surgery on any part of your body, including the mental or emotional strain you have to work through, there is going to be some pain before you can heal from the injury. If you want to lose weight, you have to skip some carbs. If you love ice cream, you know how easy it is to overdo it. Abstaining from those things we love is painful. But there is no simple way to a solution, whether it's overcoming personal tragedy or losing weight.

Naturally, my mother is a sparkling example of someone who provided us with stability in the midst of change as she was coping with it herself. After my father died, she took us to New Fellowship Baptist Church in Memphis, pastored by her father, Hugh Morris Sr. I started my work in ministry by playing the organ at Fellowship Baptist. It was there that I sensed my call to preach for a second time at the age of nineteen (the first was at age thirteen, but the second brought a stronger urging). After I delivered my first sermon there, every Sunday found me speaking somewhere in the metropolitan area—if not at New Fellowship, then at a church pastored by a friend of my father's. All those guest sermons prepared me for the role I am in now forty-five years later.

Ed Sr. had baptized me at the age of eight. Because of his influence, I always knew that God was there. While I didn't understand that to the degree I do now, I knew He had transformed my life and done something inside of me. It was a spiritual experience, the kind that doesn't take place just because you're standing in a church building or have memorized a few Bible verses. It's as Paul wrote:

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. —1 Corinthians 2:14

Finding strength in the midst of change is a common struggle for many individuals. Yet we need to change if we hope to dance regardless of what life throws at us. In that regard, nobody is more of a shining light to me than my close friend, Russell. He is one of several guys I grew up with, starting in our early teen years. Though a year older than most of us, Russell was part of a group who all sang together during choral competitions at the University of Memphis. Later, we all became pastors; Russell, one other friend, and I always have lunch together at some point in November, the month we all celebrate our birthdays.

No sooner had our nation learned to grapple with the earth-shaking impact of the recent global tragedy than Russell got slammed with a more personal challenge: the loss of both legs. He has walked out change in a way that none of us ever expected to face. His doctor warned that they would likely have to amputate one of his legs, but when they delved deeper, surgeons saw they would have to take both.

For the past three-plus years, I've walked with Russell through a really heart-wrenching challenge. I have watched him closely as he has dealt with complications, frustrations, and aggravations that I haven't remotely come close to during my life. It's easy to talk about dancing with change until you consider that the only way my friend can get on the dance floor is in a wheelchair. I have often gone to the hospital to visit him and more than once strained to think of a way to offer encouragement.

Russell has been in and out of the hospital on multiple occasions over three years. A strong, tall (six-foot-one), athletic guy who exhorted, inspired, and edified his congregation hasn't preached for three years while fighting the gloomiest of feelings and bleak diagnoses. Reaching the so-called golden years while preparing to wear prosthetic legs and trying to regain a sense of normalcy would hurt most of us.

I have seen Russell so down that there were times many of us didn't think he would make it, especially the time he spent forty-eight days in the hospital with all kinds of gadgets hooked up to him. When family and friends went in and out of his room, it was often with sad looks and hushed voices. But Russell kept on fighting, exercising his strong will to make it through. That man has taught me so much about dancing!

Watching his ordeal has caused me to look at how I handle life. Adapting to change means continuing on, never giving up, and never letting struggles get the upper hand. A friend took some pictures of me pushing him in his wheelchair, with both of us laughing. The ability to still laugh when you go through something as tough as this with a friend will definitely change your perspective. As a pastor, I speak a lot—not just on Sunday mornings. But figuring out how to make a friend feel better was a different matter because I didn't have many words to speak.

LEARNING TO CHANGE

What do you say in such times? What I discovered in visiting Russell is that words aren't always what matters the most. Sometimes, presence is the most powerful tool we have. It's our presence that speaks the loudest. People think they have to say a lot when *just being there* is what leaves a lasting impression. I often just sit there with him, and he doesn't have to call the nurse because I'm there to pour him water or fetch some ice. People often look for grandiose gestures when it's the small things that really matter, like still being by his side when he woke up from a long nap.

Still, having lived through enormous challenges, I wanted to know: what has Russell learned about change? When we talked about it in the spring of 2024, his thoughts were

profound and worth meditating on, no matter what your station in life or the difficulty of your dance. He observed that change can be frustrating or fruitful. Naturally, he experienced considerable frustration at first, but slowly he began to appreciate the fruitfulness he could experience as the surgeon cut away the disease that had attacked his body. Russell said:

I had it hard at times wrapping my mind around things. Change also had to do with ego. It was a strange time. I had a hard time wrapping my mind around change because of my ego. It took my wife talking to me to help me work around that. When you're undergoing change, you need to have somebody around you to help you think on other terms. You don't need to hear the same people with the same negative outlook you have. You need to be around people who will point you to what your ego won't let you see.

Russell added that one of our biggest struggles stems from the fact that we often don't see the necessity of change. He said it doesn't matter how often a pastor proclaims the need to change to a congregation; until they see the need to change and decide to do so, they're going to remain stuck in neutral. He said:

You need to see the necessity of change. Then, secondly, you need to embrace the need for change. When you're seeing your role changing, you don't need to be acting like your grandchild. You ought to be in step with life's changes. Don't change for the sake of change, though. Remember you are changing because there's an inward conviction.

That's the state of mind I had to reach. I needed to accept the cards that life had dealt. It is unhealthy to resist change no matter what the negative consequences. It causes us to get hung up in our sin.

TRUST THE PLAN

In addition to Russell's insights, there are various perspectives from both personal experience and biblical teaching that can provide guidance and encouragement. Successfully navigating change always starts with trusting in God's plan. In times of change, it is crucial to trust in God's plan and purpose for our lives. Proverbs 3:5–6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." When we acknowledge God's sovereignty and surrender to His guidance, we can find strength and assurance in His faithfulness.

In addition to trusting in God, we must embrace His promises. The Bible is filled with promises of strength and comfort during challenging times. Isaiah 41:10 assures us that God will strengthen and help us. This verse reads like poetry: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." I love those words! They are a rock-solid guarantee of His presence, His encouragement, and His provision. Psalm 46:1 is another verse brimming with reassurance: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Verses 5 and 7 add: "God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. . . . The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." By holding on to these kinds of promises, we can find solace and strength in the face of change.

Not only does God's Word help us, but we can find help from others as we seek support and community. Change can be overwhelming, particularly in the breakneck pace of technological developments the deeper we march into the twenty-first century. Yet we do not have to face it alone. It is vital to seek support from trusted friends, family members, and spiritual communities. Galatians 6:2 encourages us to carry one another's burdens. Not only does this fulfill the law of Christ (according to Paul), but it also provides a source of strength and encouragement during times of change. Rapid change. Bewildering change. Change we older folks could barely fathom when we first tuned in to watch *The Jetsons* in 1962 is now part of daily life. Been served by a robot at your favorite restaurant lately?

In many ways, I think we are still struggling with the aftermath of lockdowns during the onset of the global tragedy. Churches adapted the best they could by shifting to online broadcasts during 2020-2021. Countless businesses, social organizations, and others employed Zoom/Google Meets/FaceTime sessions to stay in touch. But when it comes to human interaction, nothing can replace face-to-face, arm-in-arm, hugging-when-appropriate contact. While I can certainly see advantages to the technological tools that help us adjust to change, we all still need dance partners to help provide a steady presence in a changing world.

BRIGHT AS A LILY

Once upon a time in a small town there lived a woman named Lily. Lily was known for her warm heart, infectious smile, and unwavering faith. She had always been content with her simple life until a series of significant changes came knocking at her door.

It started with Lily's job of many years suddenly and unexpectedly getting eliminated amid a corporate restructuring. She felt a mix of shock and uncertainty, wondering how she could provide for herself and make ends meet. But instead of allowing fear to consume her, Lily chose to embrace this change with grace and purpose.

Taking this as an opportunity to explore new possibilities, Lily enrolled in online courses to enhance her skills and broaden her knowledge. She dedicated her free time to volunteering at local organizations, using her talents to help others in their time of need. In the process, Lily discovered hidden passions and strengths she never knew she possessed.

As Lily continued to navigate her changing circumstances, another cruel twist of fate awaited her. One by one, her trusted circle of close friends moved away, leaving her feeling lonely and disconnected. However, instead of dwelling on the void, she sought out new friendships and community. She joined a local book club, attended social events, and reached out to her neighbors.

Through these interactions, Lily discovered that she could form connections in the most unexpected places. She found solace in the kindness and support of her newfound friends, who became like a second family to her, a family badly needed in the aftermath of the loss of her job, coworkers, and friends.

However, the most profound change in Lily's life came when she faced a startling health crisis. Her primary care doctor diagnosed her with a serious illness, sending shockwaves through her world. While she could have crumbled under the weight of this diagnosis, instead Lily chose to face it head-on with unwavering faith.

Not only did she lean on her spiritual beliefs and seek comfort in prayer, Lily surrounded herself with loved ones who provided unwavering support during her treatments. Throughout

this journey, this determined woman maintained a positive attitude—the kind needed to fight her way through what appeared to be overwhelming odds.

As Lily’s health gradually improved, she came to realize that her experiences had helped transform her in ways she never thought possible. The combination of facing job loss, building new relationships, and battling illness had made her stronger, more resilient, and deeply grateful for every moment of her life.

Through her journey of change, Lily discovered a profound sense of purpose. She became an advocate for others facing similar challenges, offering support and encouragement to those in need. Her story became an inspiration to many, reminding them that change—although difficult—can lead to personal growth, resilience, and a deeper appreciation for life’s many blessings—even those that come disguised as adversity.

In the end, Lily’s grace, strength, and purpose-filled life became a beacon of hope to everyone who encountered her. She proved that navigating change with grace and purpose is not only possible but can also become a transformative and empowering journey.

STRONG FAITH NEEDED

Coping with change demands a stronger faith than ever. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as the “confidence in what we hope for and the assurance about what we do not see.” During times of dizzying change, holding on to our faith and hope in God’s goodness can anchor us and give us the strength to persevere. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, we can find comfort in knowing that “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

But we need more. Practicing self-care is essential during times of change. That means taking care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Engaging in activities that nurture our well-being—such as prayer, meditation, exercise, and seeking healthy relationships—can strengthen us from within. They can also help us navigate through change more effectively.

We shouldn’t fear change, because it often brings us opportunities for learning and personal growth. Change is a chance to develop new skills, gain wisdom, and deepen our understanding. All this can serve to empower us and give us a sense of purpose and strength, in the same way a powerlifter develops his muscles by straining against barbells loaded to the brim, again and again.

While we navigate change, we need to continue staying grounded in God’s Word. Regularly immersing ourselves in the wisdom and truth of Scripture can provide us with continuing guidance and strength. Psalm 119:105 reminds us that His Word is “a lamp unto [our] feet and a light unto [our] path,” guiding us through the uncertainties of life.

Granted, change can be challenging, but it also presents an opportunity to develop resilience. By embracing change with a positive mindset, learning from setbacks, and staying focused on our goals, we can build resilience and find strength in adapting to new and sometimes confusing circumstances.

Developing strength in the midst of change is a journey that requires faith, trust, and perseverance. By seeking God’s guidance, leaning on supportive relationships, practicing self-care, and staying rooted in His promises, we can navigate through change with strength and grace.