

Personal Growth



# Falling Upward



Richard Rohr

Digital Edition

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## ***Praise for Falling Upward***

“Richard Rohr has been a mentor to so many of us over the years, teaching us new ways to read Scripture, giving us tools to better understand ourselves, showing us new approaches to prayer and suffering, and even helping us see and practice a new kind of seeing. Now, in *Falling Upward*, Richard offers a simple but deeply helpful framework for seeing the whole spiritual life—one that will help both beginners on the path as they look ahead and long-term pilgrims as they look back over their journey so far.”—Brian McLaren, author of *A New Kind of Christianity* and *Naked Spirituality* ([brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net))

“The value of this book lies in the way Richard Rohr shares his own aging process with us in ways that help us be less afraid of seeing and accepting how we are growing older day by day. Without sugar coating the challenging aspects of growing older, Richard Rohr invites us to look closer, to sit with what is happening to us as we age. As we do so, the value and gift of aging begin to come into view. We begin to see that, as we grow older, we are being awakened to deep, simple, and mysterious things we simply could not see when we were younger. The value of this book lies in the clarity with which it invites us to see the value of our own experience of aging as the way God is moving us from doing to being, from achieving to appreciating, from planning and plotting to trusting the strange process in which as we diminish, we strangely expand and grow in all sorts of ways we cannot and do not need to explain to anyone including ourselves. This freedom from the need to explain, this humble realization of what we cannot explain, is itself one of the unexpected blessings of aging this book invites to explore. It sounds too good to be true, but we can begin to realize the timeless wisdom of the elders is sweetly and

gently welling up in our own mind and heart.”—Jim Finley, retreat leader, Merton scholar, and author of *The Contemplative Heart*

“This is Richard Rohr at his vintage best: prophetic, pastoral, practical. A book I will gratefully share with my children and grandchildren.”—Cynthia Bourgeault, Episcopal priest, retreat leader, and the author of *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, *Mystical Hope*, and *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*

“*Falling Upward* is a book of liberation. It calls forth the promise within us, and frees us to follow it into wider dimensions of our spiritual authenticity. This ‘second half of life’ need not wait till our middle years. It emerges whenever we are ready and able to expand beyond the structures and strictures of our chosen path, and sink or soar into the mysteries to which it pointed. Then the promise unfolds—in terms of what we discover we are and the timescapes we inhabit, as well as the gifts we can offer the world. With Richard Rohr as a guide, the spunk and spank of his language and his exhilarating insights, this mystery can become as real and immediate as your hand on the doorknob.”—Joanna Macy, author *World as Lover, World as Self*

“Father Richard Rohr has gathered innumerable luminous jewels of wisdom during a lifetime of wrestling with self, soul, God, the church, the ancient sacred stories of initiation and its modern realities, and the wilder and darker dimensions of the human psyche. His new book, *Falling Upward*, is a great and gracious gift for all of us longing for lanterns on the perilous path to psychospiritual maturity, a path that reveals secrets of personal destiny only after falling into the swamps of failure, woundedness, and personal demons. An uncommon, true elder in these fractured times, Richard Rohr shows us the way into the rarely reached “second half of life” and the encounter with



our souls—our authentic and unique way of participating in and joyously contributing to our miraculous world.”—Bill Plotkin, Ph.D., author of *Soulcraft* and *Nature and the Human Soul*

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# FALLING UPWARD

*A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*

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Richard Rohr

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A Wiley Imprint  
[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—

[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Rohr, Richard.

Falling upward : a spirituality for the two halves of life /  
Richard Rohr.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-90775-7 (hardback); 978-1-118-24803-4  
(ebk); 978-1-118-24802-7 (ebk); 978-1-118-24801-0 (ebk)

1. Spiritual formation. 2. Spirituality. I. Title.

BV4511.R64 2011

248.4—dc22 2010049429

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*The greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally unsolvable. They can never be solved, but only outgrown.*

*—CARL JUNG*

*First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!*

*—LADY JULIAN OF NORWICH*

*To the Franciscan friars, my brothers, who trained me so well in the skills and spirituality of the first half of life that they also gave me the grounding, the space, the call, and the inevitability of a further and fantastic journey*

# ***The Invitation to a Further Journey***

A journey into the second half of our own lives awaits us all. Not everybody goes there, even though all of us get older, and some of us get older than others. A “further journey” is a well-kept secret, for some reason. Many people do not even know there is one. There are too few who are aware of it, tell us about it, or know that it is different from the journey of the first half of life. So why should I try to light up the path a little? Why should I presume that I have anything to say here? And why should I write to people who are still on their first journey, and happily so?

I am driven to write because after forty years as a Franciscan teacher, working in many settings, religions, countries, and institutions, I find that many, if not most, people and institutions remain stymied in the preoccupations of the first half of life. By that I mean that most people's concerns remain those of establishing their personal (or superior) identity, creating various boundary markers for themselves, seeking security, and perhaps linking to what seem like significant people or projects. These tasks are good to some degree and even necessary. We are all trying to find what the Greek philosopher Archimedes called a “lever and a place to stand” so that we can move the world just a little bit. The world would be much worse off if we did not do this first and important task.

But, in my opinion, this first-half-of-life task is no more than finding the starting gate. It is merely the warm-up act, not the full journey. It is the raft but not the shore. If you realize that there is a further journey, you might do the warm-up act quite differently, which would better prepare you for what follows. People at any age must know about

the whole arc of their life and where it is tending and leading.

We know about this further journey from the clear and inviting voices of others who have been there, from the sacred and secular texts that invite us there, from our own observations of people who have entered this new territory, and also, sadly, from those who never seem to move on. The further journey usually appears like a seductive invitation and a kind of promise or hope. We are summoned to it, not commanded to go, perhaps because each of us has to go on this path freely, with all the messy and raw material of our own unique lives. But we don't have to do it, nor do we have to do it alone. There *are* guideposts, some common patterns, utterly new kinds of goals, a few warnings, and even personal guides on this further journey. I hope I can serve you in offering a bit of each of these in this book.

All of these sources and resources give me the courage and the desire to try to map the terrain of this further journey, along with the terrain of the first journey, but most especially the needed crossover points. As you will see from the chapter titles, I consider the usual crossover points to be a kind of “necessary suffering,” stumbling over stumbling stones, and lots of shadowboxing, but often just a gnawing desire for “ourselves,” for something more, or what I will call “homesickness.”

I am trusting that you will see the truth of this map, yet it is the kind of soul truth that we only know “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12)—and through a glass brightly at the same time. Yet any glass through which we see is always made of human hands, like mine. All spiritual language is by necessity metaphor and symbol. The Light comes from elsewhere, yet it is necessarily reflected through those of us still walking on the journey ourselves. As Desmond Tutu told me on a recent trip to Cape Town,



“We are only the light bulbs, Richard, and our job is just to remain screwed in!”

I believe that God gives us our soul, our deepest identity, our True Self,<sup>1</sup> our unique blueprint, at our own “immaculate conception.” Our unique little bit of heaven is installed by the Manufacturer within the product, at the beginning! We are given a span of years to discover it, to choose it, and to live our own destiny to the full. If we do not, our True Self will never be offered again, in our own unique form—which is perhaps why almost all religious traditions present the matter with utterly charged words like “heaven” and “hell.” Our soul's discovery is utterly crucial, momentous, and of pressing importance for each of us and for the world. We do not “make” or “create” our souls; we just “grow” them up. We are the clumsy stewards of our own souls. We are charged to awaken, and much of the work of spirituality is learning how to stay out of the way of this rather natural growing and awakening. We need to *unlearn* a lot, it seems, to get back to that foundational life which is “hidden in God” (Colossians 3:3). Yes, transformation is often more about unlearning than learning, which is why the religious traditions call it “conversion” or “repentance.”

For me, no poet says this quite so perfectly as the literally *inimitable* Gerard Manley Hopkins in his Duns Scotus-inspired poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.”<sup>2</sup>

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *what I do is me: for that I came*.

All we can give back and all God wants from any of us is to humbly and proudly return the product that we have been given—which is ourselves! If I am to believe the saints and mystics, this finished product is more valuable to God than it seemingly is to us. Whatever this Mystery is, we are definitely in on the deal! True religion is always a deep

intuition that we are already *participating* in something very good, in spite of our best efforts to deny it or avoid it. In fact, the best of modern theology is revealing a strong “turn toward participation,” as opposed to religion as mere observation, affirmation, moralism, or group belonging. There is nothing to join, only something to recognize, suffer, and enjoy as a *participant*. You are already in the *eternal flow* that Christians would call the divine life of the Trinity.

Whether we find our True Self depends in large part on the moments of time we are each allotted, and the moments of freedom that we each receive and choose during that time. Life is indeed “momentous,” created by accumulated moments in which the deeper “I” is slowly revealed if we are ready to see it. Holding our *inner blueprint*, which is a good description of our soul, and returning it humbly to the world and to God by love and service is indeed of ultimate concern. Each thing and every person must act out its nature fully, at whatever cost. It is our life's purpose, and the deepest meaning of “natural law.” We are here to give back fully and freely what was first given to us—but now writ personally—by us! It is probably the most courageous and free act we will ever perform—and it takes both halves of our life to do it fully. The first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it.

So get ready for a great adventure, the one you were really born for. If we never get to our little bit of heaven, our life does not make much sense, and we have created our own “hell.” So get ready for some new freedom, some dangerous permission, some hope from nowhere, some unexpected happiness, some stumbling stones, some radical grace, and some new and pressing responsibility for yourself and for our suffering world.

# ***Introduction***

What is a normal goal to a young person becomes a neurotic hindrance in old age.

—CARL JUNG

No wise person ever wanted to be younger.

—NATIVE AMERICAN APHORISM

There is much evidence on several levels that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task is to build a strong “container” or identity; the second is to find the contents that the container was meant to hold. The first task we take for granted as the very purpose of life, which does not mean we do it well. The second task, I am told, is more encountered than sought; few arrive at it with much preplanning, purpose, or passion. So you might wonder if there is much point in providing a guide to the territory ahead of time. Yet that is exactly why we must. It is vitally important to know what is coming and being offered to all of us.

We are a “first-half-of-life culture,” largely concerned about *surviving successfully*. Probably most cultures and individuals across history have been situated in the first half of their own development up to now, because it is all they had time for. We all try to do what seems like the task that life first hands us: establishing an identity, a home, relationships, friends, community, security, and building a proper platform for our only life.

But it takes us much longer to discover “the task within the task,” as I like to call it: *what we are really doing when we are doing what we are doing*. Two people can have the same job description, and one is holding a subtle or not-so-subtle life energy (*eros*) in doing his or her job, while another is holding a subtle or not-so-subtle negative energy