# FALLING A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life UPWARD



# RICHARD ROHR

Author of The Naked Now

# 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)

"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 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 unfoldance 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

# FALLING UPWARD

A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life



Richard Rohr



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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 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,¹ 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.



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 (thanatos) while doing the exact same job. Most of us are somewhere in between, I suppose.

We actually respond to one another's energy more than to people's exact words or actions. In any situation, your taking or giving of energy is what you are actually doing. Everybody can feel, suffer, or enjoy the difference, but few can exactly say what it is that is happening. Why do I feel drawn or repelled? What we all desire and need from one another, of course, is that life energy called *eros*! It always draws, creates, and connects things.

This is surely what Jesus meant when he said that you could only tell a good tree from a bad one "by its fruits" (Matthew 7:20). Inside of life energy, a group or family will be productive and energetic; inside of death energy there will be gossip, cynicism, and mistrust hiding behind every interaction. Yet you usually cannot precisely put your finger on what is happening. That is second-half-of-life wisdom, or what Paul calls "the discerning of spirits" (1 Corinthians 12:10). Perhaps this book can be a

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school for such discernment and wisdom. That is surely my hope.

It is when we begin to pay attention, and seek integrity precisely in *the task within the task* that we begin to move from the first to the second half of our own lives. Integrity largely has to do with purifying our intentions and a growing honesty about our actual motives. It is hard work. Most often we don't pay attention to that inner task until we have had some kind of fall or failure in our outer tasks. This pattern is invariably true for reasons I have yet to fathom.

Life, if we are honest about it, is made up of many failings and fallings, amidst all of our hopeful growing and achieving. Those failings and fallings must be there for a purpose, a purpose that neither culture nor church has fully understood. Most of us find all failure bewildering, but it does not have to be. My observations tell me that if we can clarify the common *sequencing*, *staging*, and *direction of life's arc* a bit more, many practical questions and dilemmas will be resolved. That doesn't mean we can avoid the journey itself. Each of us still has to walk it for ourselves before we get the big picture of human life.

Maybe we should just call this book *Tips for the Road*, a sort of roadside assistance program. Or perhaps it is like a medical brochure that describes the possible symptoms of a future heart attack. Reading it when you're well might feel like a waste of time, but it could make the difference between life and death if a heart attack actually happens.

My assumption is that the second half of your own life *will* happen, although I hope it is not a heart attack (unless you understand "heart attack" symbolically, of course!).

When I say that you will enter the second half of life, I don't mean it in a strictly chronological way. Some young people, especially those who have learned from early suffering, are already there, and some older folks are still quite childish. If you are still in the first half of your life, chronologically or spiritually, I would hope that this book will offer you some good guidance, warnings, limits, permissions, and lots of possibilities. If you are in the second half of life already, I hope that this book will at least assure you that you are not crazy—and also give you some hearty bread for your whole journey.

None of us go into our spiritual maturity completely of our own accord, or by a totally free choice. We are led by *Mystery*, which religious people rightly call grace. Most of us have to be cajoled or seduced into it, or we fall into it by some kind of "transgression," believe it or not; like Jacob finding his birthright through cunning, and Esau losing his by failure (Genesis 27). Those who walk the full and entire journey are considered "called" or "chosen" in the Bible, perhaps "fated" or "destined" in world mythology and literature, but always they are the ones who have heard some deep invitation to "something more," and set out to find it by both grace and daring. Most get little reassurance from others, or even have full confidence that they are

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totally right. Setting out is always a leap of faith, a risk in the deepest sense of the term, and yet an adventure too.

The familiar and the habitual are so falsely reassuring, and most of us make our homes there permanently. The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested, so God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push—usually a big one—or we will not go. Someone has to make clear to us that homes are not meant to be lived in—but only to be moved out from.

Most of us are never told that we can set out from the known and the familiar to take on a further journey. Our institutions and our expectations, including our churches, are almost entirely configured to encourage, support, reward, and validate the tasks of the first half of life. Shocking and disappointing, but I think it is true. We are more struggling to survive than to thrive, more just "getting through" or trying to get to the top than finding out what is really at the top or was already at the bottom. Thomas Merton, the American monk, pointed out that we may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

Most of us in the first half of life suspect that all is not fully working, and we are probably right! It was not meant to stand alone. We were just told to build a nice basement and some kind of foundation for our house, but not given any plans or even a hint that we also needed to build an XVIII INTRODUCTION

actual "living" room upstairs, let alone a nutritious kitchen or an erotic bedroom, and much less our own chapel. So many, if not most, of us settle for the brick and mortar of first-stage survival, and never get to what I will be calling "the unified field" of life itself. As Bill Plotkin, a wise guide, puts it, many of us learn to do our "survival dance," but we never get to our actual "sacred dance."

# THE WAY UP AND THE WAY DOWN

The soul has many secrets. They are only revealed to those who want them, and are never completely forced upon us. One of the best-kept secrets, and yet one hidden in plain sight, is that the way up is the way down. Or, if you prefer, the way down is the way up. This pattern is obvious in all of nature, from the very change of seasons and substances on this earth, to the six hundred million tons of hydrogen that the sun burns every day to light and warm our earth, and even to the metabolic laws of dieting or fasting. The down-up pattern is constant, too, in mythology, in stories like that of Persephone, who must descend into the underworld and marry Hades for spring to be reborn.

In legends and literature, sacrifice of something to achieve something else is almost the only pattern. Dr. Faust has to sell his soul to the devil to achieve power and knowledge; Sleeping Beauty must sleep for a hundred years before she can receive the prince's kiss. In Scripture,

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we see that the wrestling and wounding of Jacob are necessary for Jacob to become Israel (Genesis 32:26–32), and the death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary to create Christianity. The loss and renewal pattern is so constant and ubiquitous that it should hardly be called a secret at all.

Yet it is still a secret, probably because we do not want to see it. We do not want to embark on a further journey if it feels like going down, especially after we have put so much sound and fury into going up. This is surely the first and primary reason why many people never get to the fullness of their own lives. The supposed achievements of the first half of life have to fall apart and show themselves to be wanting in some way, or we will not move further. Why would we?

Normally a job, fortune, or reputation has to be lost, a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured. The pattern in fact is so clear that one has to work rather hard, or be intellectually lazy, to miss the continual lesson. This, of course, was Scott Peck's major insight in his best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*. He told me personally once that he felt most Western people were just spiritually lazy. And when we are lazy, we stay on the path we are already on, even if it is going nowhere. It is the spiritual equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics: everything winds down unless some outside force winds it back up. True spirituality could be

called the "outside force," although surprisingly it is found "inside," but we will get to that later.

Some kind of falling, what I will soon call "necessary suffering," is programmed into the journey. All the sources seem to say it, starting with Adam and Eve and all they represent. Yes, they "sinned" and were cast out of the Garden of Eden, but from those very acts came "consciousness," conscience, and their own further journey. But it all started with transgression. Only people unfamiliar with sacred story are surprised that they ate the apple. As soon as God told them specifically not to, you know they will! It creates the whole story line inside of which we can find ourselves.

It is not that suffering or failure *might* happen, or that it will only happen to you if you are bad (which is what religious people often think), or that it will happen to the unfortunate, or to a few in other places, or that you can somehow by cleverness or righteousness avoid it. No, it *will* happen, and to you! Losing, failing, falling, sin, and the suffering that comes from those experiences—all of this is a necessary and even good part of the human journey. As my favorite mystic, Lady Julian of Norwich, put it in her Middle English, "Sin is behovely!"

You cannot avoid sin or mistake anyway (Romans 5:12), but if you try too fervently, it often creates even worse problems. Jesus loves to tell stories like those of the publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14) and the famous one about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), in which one

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character does his life totally right and is, in fact, wrong; and the other who does it totally wrong ends up God's beloved! Now deal with that! Jesus also tells us that there are two groups who are very good at trying to deny or avoid this humiliating surprise: those who are very "rich" and those who are very "religious." These two groups have very different plans for themselves, as they try to totally steer their own ships with well-chosen itineraries. They follow two different ways of going "up" and avoiding all "down."

Such a down-and-then-up perspective does not fit into our Western philosophy of progress, nor into our desire for upward mobility, nor into our religious notions of perfection or holiness. "Let's hope it is *not* true, at least for me," we all say! Yet the perennial tradition, sometimes called the wisdom tradition, says that it is and will always be true. St. Augustine called it the passing over mystery (or the "paschal mystery" from the Hebrew word for Passover, *pesach*).

Today we might use a variety of metaphors: reversing engines, a change in game plan, a falling off of the very wagon that we constructed. No one would choose such upheaval consciously; we must somehow "fall" into it. Those who are too carefully engineering their own superiority systems will usually not allow it at all. It is much more done to you than anything you do yourself, and sometimes nonreligious people are more open to this change in strategy than are religious folks who have their private salvation

project all worked out. This is how I would interpret Jesus' enigmatic words, "The children of this world are wiser in their ways than the children of light" (Luke 16:8). I have met too many rigid and angry old Christians and clergy to deny this sad truth, but it seems to be true in all religions until and unless they lead to the actual transformation of persons.

In this book I would like to describe how this message of falling down and moving up is, in fact, the most counter-intuitive message in most of the world's religions, including and most especially Christianity. We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right. That might just be the central message of how spiritual growth happens; yet nothing in us wants to believe it. I actually think it is the only workable meaning of any remaining notion of "original sin." There seems to have been a fly in the ointment from the beginning, but the key is recognizing and dealing with the fly rather than needing to throw out the whole ointment!

If there is such a thing as human perfection, it seems to emerge precisely from how we handle the imperfection that is everywhere, especially our own. What a clever place for God to hide holiness, so that only the humble and earnest will find it! A "perfect" person ends up being one who can consciously forgive and include imperfection rather than one who thinks he or she is totally above and beyond imperfection. It becomes sort of obvious once you say it out