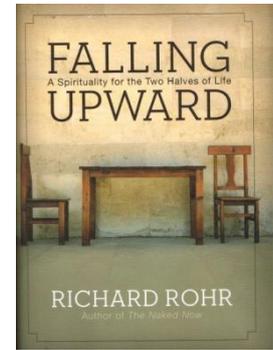


# Falling Upward – A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life : Richard Rohr

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Notes Alison Morgan April 2012



**'The first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it', xi.**

Thomas Merton.. points 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' – xvii. It's as if we build the basement and the first floor, but have no idea how to build the upper stories. Maybe it's because we fear getting old; travelling upwards is good, travelling down seems less so. '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?' xix. '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' – otherwise we become spiritually lazy. This message of falling down and moving up is counterintuitive, but essential. *We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right.* xxii

The model – Odysseus. Teresias' prophecy is an omen of what will happen to all of us. p xxxiv. It comes when he is at rock bottom – travelling through Hades. It's divine; he's holding a golden sceptre. it's about reconnection, leaving Ithaca for the mainland. He carries the oar, his previous tool, but uses it as a winnowing shovel, and will bury it before he can return home; he sacrifices the symbols of the first half of his life to Neptune; he makes a sacrifice to all the gods; he returns home to die. The second half of his journey is essential; only then does it become possible for him to say he can live happily with his people around him, until he sinks under the comfortable burden of years, and death will come to him gently from the sea. 'Death is largely a threat to those who have not yet lived their life. Odysseus has lived the journeys of both halves of life, and is ready to freely and finally let go.

## 1. The two halves of life

The task of the first half of life is to create a proper container for one's life – and answer questions like, what makes me significant; how can I support myself; who will go with me? The task of the second half is to find the actual *contents* that his container was meant to hold and deliver. The container is not an end in itself, but exists for the sake of the deeper and fuller life you do not yet know about.

In the first half, success, security, looking good are the main questions – the lower parts of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. NB the US culture is still adolescent – prioritising first half of life issues like defence and security over second half issues like education, health care for the poor, the arts. If we remain preoccupied with order, control, safety, pleasure and certitude, many people never get to the contents of their own lives. 'Human life is about more than building boundaries, protecting identities, creating tribes, and teaching impulse control'. Lk 12.23, life is more than food; Matt 16.26 gaining the world and losing your soul.

Ken Keyes: 'More suffering comes into the world by people taking offence than by people intending to give offence', 7.

Carl Jung first popularised the phrase 'the two halves of life', but many other teachers recognise the steps. Abraham & Sarah; Exodus; Jesus's 4 kinds of soil; stations of the cross; Bonaventure, Fowler, Maslow et al. Growth and development have a direction; unless you chart it you have no way to name maturity or immaturity. It's why societies are best led by wise elders – not by youthful suicide bombers. But immature societies tend to choose immature leaders. Democracy isn't the best form of govt, just the safest.

Much of organised religion is living inside first half of life issues.

## 2. The hero and heroine's journey

The pattern of the heroic journey is constant in most cultures – the world is good; an adventure presents itself; the real problem emerges – wounding, trials, dilemmas – and the world becomes wider and more complex; and they finally discover the real issue, the life beneath the life situation. ('Most people confuse their life situation with their actual life, which is an underlying flow beneath the everyday events'). The hero then goes back to where he started, but different.

## 3. The first half of life

*The world is more magical, less predictable, more autonomous, less controllable, more varied, less simple, more infinite, less knowable, more wonderfully troubling that we could have imagined being able to tolerate when we were young – James Hollis. 25*

You need a strong container to hold the contents and contradictions that arrive later in life – many people have lived defeated lives because they tried to give up a self that was not there yet. We need rules and laws to help us limit our essential egocentricity and make community/family life possible.

The most effective organisations have a 'good boss' and a 'bad boss' who work closely together – one holds us, one challenges us. Most of us thank the hard parent/teacher/coach, but usually years later! We don't value law, authority, discipline, targets enough. The fact that people will even follow dominating leaders shows the need we have for structure, boundaries – to free us from personal responsibility.

Bill Plotkin – work on helping people move from an egocentric world view to a soul centric world view – an event of closure, transition, is needed to help people rejoin their communities eg as useful citizens after WW2 in Japan. Also needed to help people move from the first half to the second half of life. They call it 'discharging your loyal soldier' – and it means moving beyond the security and validation of the previous authority voices (which you may even confuse with the voice of God). The loyal soldier is the voice of all your early authority figures. He cannot get you to the second half of life. Odysseus puts down his oar. Dante lets go of Virgil and moves on with Beatrice. In the first half of life we fight the devil and have the illusion of winning; in the second half, we lose because we are fighting God. In the first half, we solidify the ego and create a loyal soldier; in the second, we defeat the ego because God wins, not us.

'God has to undo our illusions secretly, ... when we are not watching and not in perfect control, say the mystics. That is perhaps why the best word for God is actually *Mystery*. We move forward in ways that we do not even understand and through the quiet workings of time and grace. When we get there, we are never sure just how it happened, and God does not seem to care who gets the credit, as long as our growth continues.' Gregory of Nyssa : 'Sin happens whenever we refuse to keep growing.'

## 4. The tragic sense of life

Life is not a straight line forwards. Nature is more disorder than order, with death as the greatest disorder of all. The gospel was able to accept that life is tragic, but added that we can survive and grow from this tragedy. Sin and failure become, in the divine economy of grace, the raw material for the redemption experience itself – but much of organised religion is peopled by people who have a mania for some ideal order, which is never true, so they are seldom content. As clergy we get into sin management instead of sin transformation. 'I do not think you should get rid of your sin until you have learned what it has to teach you' – otherwise it just returns in new forms (Lk 11.24-26, swept house). The tragic sense of life is not pessimism or fatalism, but ultimate and humiliating realism, which demands forgiveness of almost everything...

## 5. Stumbling over the stumbling stone

'Sooner or later, if you are on any classic "spiritual schedule", some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private

resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it [8.14]; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must “lose” at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.’ 65-66. It’s an absolute in the spiritual literature of the world.

We don’t leave our comfort zones unless we have to. We can’t plan our own enlightenment either, because it will be ego driven. Failure and humiliation help you to look where you never would otherwise; ‘God comes to you disguised as your life’ – Paula D’Arcy. It is what he calls necessary suffering – dramatised by Paul’s fall on the Damascus Road, Acts 26.14. ‘It seems that in the spiritual world, we do not really find something until we first lose it, ignore it, miss it, long for it, choose it, and personally find it again – but now on a new level’. 3 of Jesus’s parables are about losing something, searching, finding and throwing a big party afterwards – Lk 15.

## 6. Necessary suffering

Jung said much unnecessary suffering is caused by people’s inability to accept the necessary suffering that comes from being human – refusal of inevitable pain just brings more pain. ‘Before the “truth sets you free,” it tends to make you miserable’. Creation groans, Rom 8.22; nature knows all about suffering, death and rebirth. ‘It lives the message without saying yes or no to it’ . 79.

One of the major blocks against the second journey is our family and community – the crab bucket syndrome; you try to get out, the other crabs just pull you back in.

## 7. Home and homesickness

Home takes on a whole new meaning, one which transcends but includes one’s initial experience of home. Rom 5.5 – the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the HS that has been given to us; John 14.18 – you will not be left orphaned. The HS guides us home; the HS is inbuilt. God creates the dissatisfaction that only grace and finally divine love can satisfy.

- we are created with an inner drive that sends us all looking for our true self
- we are created with an inner restlessness that urges us on to the risks and promises of a second half to our life
- we dare not fill our minds with addictions or distractions – the shape of evil is more superficiality/blindness than the usually listed ‘hot sins’ – sin is to stay on the surface
- if we go to the depths of anything, we will knock against something real – we will move from the starter kit of belief to an actual inner knowing
- all religions point to this – if heaven is later, it is because it is first of all now
- the real is forever

## 8. Amnesia and the big picture

Any discovery/recovery of our divine union has been called “heaven” by most traditions. Its loss has been called “hell”.

## 9. A second simplicity

‘To hold the full mystery of life is always to endure its other half, which is the equal mystery of death and doubt. To know anything fully is always to hold that part of it which is still mysterious and unknowable’ – 111-12.

## 10. A bright sadness

Our mature years are characterized by a kind of bright sadness and a sober happiness. John of the Cross called it ‘luminous darkness’. Life becomes more spacious, the boundaries of the container having been enlarged by

the constant addition of new experiences and relationships. You are like an expandable suitcase, and you became so almost without you noticing. Now you are just *here*, and here holds more than enough. You know that we are all in this together, that we are all equally naked under our clothes. It is good to be just part of the general dance; life becomes more participatory than assertive. A person at this stage is 'generative' (Erik Erikson) – a person who is eager and able to generate life from his or her own abundance and for the benefit of following generations. God is no longer small, punitive, tribal; instead of worshipping the raft, we love the shore where it has taken them. Our actions are less compulsive; *we do what we are called to do, and then try to let go of the consequences. We usually cannot do that very well when we are young.*

'In the second half of life, no other way of being makes sense or gives the satisfaction your soul needs or enjoys. This new and deeper passion is what people mean when they say, "I must do this particular thing or my life will not make sense" or "It is no longer a choice!" Your life and your delivery system are now one, whereas before, your life and your occupation seemed like two different things. Your concern is not so much to have what you love anymore, but to love what you have – right now. This is a monumental change from the first half of life, so much so that it is almost the litmus test of whether you are in the second half of life at all.' 123-24.

The rules are different now – we give things away. People feel safe and loved around us. We are the grandparents of the world!

## 11. The shadowlands

Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see. The more you have cultivated a chosen persona, the more shadow work you will have to do. Our self image is not lasting; it's just created out of your own mind, desire, choice, and everybody else's preferences for you! It's not objective at all. The saint is someone who has no 'I' to protect or project.

In many men, the inability to feel their sadness takes the form of aimless anger – and the only solution is to face the sadness beneath it. It's not the same as depression – which often comes from never having taken any risks, moved outside one's comfort zone, lived or loved. Many people in their later years are just depressed or angry.

## 12. New problems and new directions

Your world should grow larger in the second half of life; but your circle of real confidants and close friends will grow smaller. Some degree of loneliness is normal, as others pursue their first half of life tasks. One of the surprises is that the cure for your loneliness is actually solitude! ***The first half of life is writing the text, and the second half is writing the commentary on that text.*** *We all tend to move toward a happy and needed introversion as we get older. Such introversion is necessary to unpack all that life has given us and taken from us. We engage in what is now a necessary and somewhat natural contemplation.* 143-44. It's more about silence and poetry than about loud music and crowds.

## 13. Falling upward

We tend to think about the second half of life as being about getting old, dealing with health issues, letting go of our physical life. In fact it's the opposite. What looks like falling can be experienced as falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, is finally connected to the whole, and lives inside the Big Picture.

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