

BOOK REVIEW

*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life.* By Richard Rohr. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. 199 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-470-90775-7.

Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and noted speaker and writer, takes a look at the second half of life in *Falling Upward*. In particular, he critically analyzes our spirituality. If we believe that middle age is the time to sit back and enjoy the fruits of the American dream we will be sadly disappointed. Rohr elucidates, invites, and calls us to a different journey, the real work of life—discerning and attending to our life’s purpose.

Rohr encourages us to examine our beliefs and make changes. Where do I need to grow? Where have I fallen? Where have I failed? Is something missing in my life? Through thoughtful reflection and working toward a more mature spirituality we may find a deeper, richer life where our whole self—failings and all—are fully embraced.

Just remember this: no one can keep you from the second half of your own life except yourself. Nothing can inhibit your second journey except your own lack of courage, patience, and imagination.... My conviction is that some falling apart of the first journey is necessary for this to happen, so do not waste a moment of time lamenting poor parenting, lost job, failed relationship, physical handicap, gender identity, economic poverty, or even the tragedy of any kind of abuse. *Pain is part of the deal.* If you don't walk into the second half of your own life, it is you who do not want it. God will always give you exactly what you truly want and desire. So make sure you desire, desire deeply, desire yourself, desire God, desire everything good, true, and beautiful. (160)

Readers will find the examples compelling, drawn from history, mythology (the Odyssey), the Gospel, and Jungian psychology. Rohr weaves these into his illustration of the journey. Like the hero and heroine’s journey we leave home (go beyond our comfort zone), encounter a problem (or wound) that will open the limits of our world and allow us to find our “Real Life.” Our final duty is to return from our journey to share our experience and knowledge with the world we left. Like Odysseus, we face a struggle that will transform us.

Rohr is fully aware that examples from the Odyssey are “an old male story and reflect issues from that side of the gender divide” (xxxvii). I agree that the story is universal. Examples of women who found their purpose are included: Esther, Joan of Arc, and Mother Teresa. The challenge for women is to take these stories and find where they can translate them into the context of their

lives. I would like Rohr to have addressed this in more detail. The trajectory of a woman's life follows a divergent path, with different touchstones than a man's life. While the challenges are similar, I think a more nuanced look at gender differences would have been valuable.

Rohr critiques the church, suggesting we will become impatient with institutions that limit the journey of life to superficial values and practices. "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" (xvii). "Do not be afraid." Go beyond the "typical Sunday church agenda" (14) and find the life to which God is calling you. Rohr suggests that other religious groups may also do the work of the "one true church," sometimes more effectively (76).

This may be true of some churches but not all. I think the more relevant question is what does your church (or institution) profess? How do the actions of the institution support its beliefs? Does it encourage mature growth? Does it encourage you to live beyond a superficial measure of success in your life?

Rohr's love of the mystery of God pervades this book. He encourages us to avoid the easy and the shallow, and to find the purpose for which God created us.

I believe that God gives us our soul, our deepest identity, our True Self, our unique blueprint, at our own "immaculate conception." ... We are given a span of years to discover it, to choose it, and to live our own destiny to the full.... Our soul's discovery is utterly crucial, momentous, and of pressing importance for each of us and for the world" (ix).

*Falling Upwards* is not a guide or a how-to. It describes the change in thinking, the movement from a dualistic orientation to a wiser way of being in the world. You will not find a blueprint for your movement into the second half of life. You can find many books that offer advice and a way to step into your journey. This topic can be explored from all angles. A "second half of life" search of a book retailer's website produced 333 titles.

In addition to Rohr's book, I recommend two authors, who write about second half of life issues from a secular perspective. James Hollis, a Jungian analyst, has written a suite of books that use Jungian archetypes and images from mythology. Part of his work examines the shadow side of the soul and parallels Rohr's emphasis on falling or failing. Hollis offers the reader insights into troubled times or dark aspects of the self. Angeles Arrien's *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom*, offers a practical guidebook for change. I found her use of the image and metaphor of a gate very accessible. By examining the challenge found at each of eight gates, you can move toward a

more authentic life. I believe it is important to look at the second half of life from both a female and male perspective. We all struggle with the same questions, but each perspective will resonate in varied ways depending on our life experience.

I recommend *Falling Upward*. It tackles a complex topic with ease and includes a 14-page index (Catholic Church, death, ego, God, identity, Jesus, wisdom...). The 6-page bibliography lists a wide range of books for further reading. Rohr encourages us to embrace the second half of life, to find our unique journey, and serve others. God will be with us while we find our true selves.

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