

Falling Upward

A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life • Richard Rohr, 2011

Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life (2011) by Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual teacher, presents a profound framework for spiritual growth and maturity. The book argues that human life—and especially spiritual development—naturally divides into two distinct halves, each with its own essential tasks and purpose.

THE FIRST HALF OF LIFE

Building the Container

In the first half (typically associated with youth and early adulthood, though not strictly chronological), the primary focus is on establishing identity, security, and structure. This involves:

- Creating a sense of self through achievements, roles, relationships, career, family, and moral/religious rules.
- Building a "container" — a strong ego structure, boundaries, and loyalties (what Rohr calls discharging the "loyal soldier" mindset later).
- Emphasizing order, success, control, and doing things "right" to gain approval and stability.

This stage is necessary and good — it's about forming a solid foundation.

THE TRANSITION

The Necessary "Falling"

Rohr's core insight is that true spiritual depth rarely emerges without some form of crisis or "falling":

- Failure, loss, suffering, tragedy, disillusionment, mistakes, or a major life disruption shatters the first-half structures.
- This "falling down" feels like defeat but is paradoxically the doorway to growth.
- Those who avoid or deny the fall often remain stuck — becoming cynical, rigid, judgmental, or superficially driven (like the elder brother in the Prodigal Son parable).

Only by going "down" can we understand "up." Rohr draws on biblical patterns (e.g., Christ's descent before resurrection), Jungian psychology, and mystical traditions to show that failure and imperfection are the raw material for redemption and transformation.

THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

Filling the Contents

The second half is not primarily about aging or decline but about spiritual maturity, depth, and wholeness. Key shifts include:

- Moving from the "container" (ego/structure) to the "contents" (authentic inner life, True Self).
- Letting go of ego-driven striving, dualistic thinking (right/wrong, us/them), and the need to perform or prove oneself.
- Embracing mystery, grace, paradox, compassion, and connection to the larger whole ("Big Picture").
- Discovering that we grow spiritually more through mistakes and "doing wrong" than through flawless performance.
- Living with greater peace, generosity, non-judgment, and integration of our shadow sides.

Rohr stresses that the second half is about falling upward — what appears as loss becomes gain, weakness becomes strength, and descent leads to ascent. It's available to anyone who responds openly to life's inevitable falls, regardless of age.

OVERALL MESSAGE

The book is an invitation to ongoing transformation and living the gospel more deeply. Rohr challenges conventional views of success, religion, and maturity, encouraging readers to welcome (rather than resist) the very experiences that break us open. Many who reach elderhood with wisdom and serenity have "fallen well" and discovered their True Self in God.

It's widely regarded as one of Rohr's most influential and accessible works, blending Christian spirituality, psychology, and universal wisdom traditions.