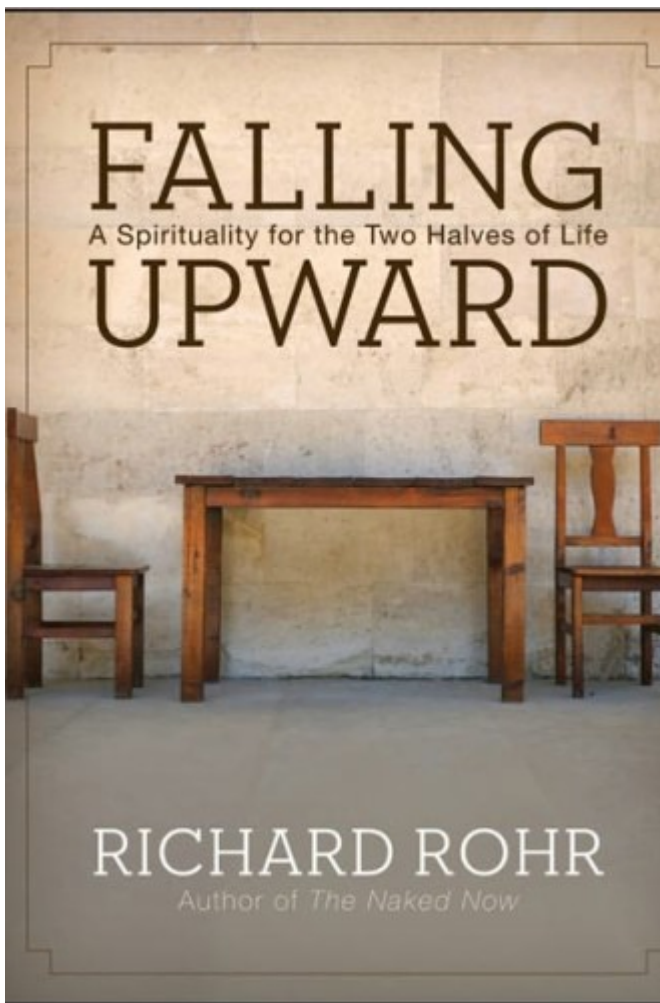


Falling Upward, by Richard Rohr

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reviewed by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Falling Upward

By Richard Rohr
Jossey-Bass

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr—author of, among other titles, *The Naked Now* and *From Wild Man to Wise Man*—has written his most sage, most important book yet. The message of *Falling Upward* is straightforward and bracing: the spiritual life is not static. You will come to a crisis in your life, and after the crisis, if you are open to it, you will enter a space of spiritual refreshment, peace and compassion that you could not have imagined before.

Rohr's framework leans heavily on Carl Jung. The spiritual life has two stages. In the first half of life, you are devoted to establishing yourself; you focus on making a career and on finding friends and a partner; you are crafting your identity. Spiritually, people in the first half of life are often drawn to order, to religious routine. We are developing habits and letting ourselves be shaped by the norms and practices of our family and community.

Then—a crisis. "Some kind of falling," Rohr says, is necessary for continued spiritual development. "Normally a job, fortune, or reputation has to be lost," writes Rohr, "a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured." The crisis can be devastating. The crisis undoes you. The flood doesn't just flood your house—it washes out your spiritual life. What you thought you knew about living the spiritual life no longer suffices for the life you are living.

Rohr does not offer a syrupy evasion of this crisis. But he does underline two crucial points. First, God has not abandoned you, even if you are sure that God has. ("All the books of the Bible seem to agree," notes Rohr, "that *somehow God is with us and we are not alone.*") Second, "We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right." That may be cold comfort during the crisis—when your house has flooded, who wants to think about spiritual growth? But later you will notice. You will wonder how you possibly could have come to where you are without that flood.

The notion that a fall must precede growth does not come just from Jung. As Rohr notes, it is written into the very life of Christ, who descended to the dead before he could be resurrected and ascend into heaven. The falling will happen—there is no way to avoid it. But the growth, the second half of life, doesn't necessarily happen. You can stay stuck if you wish. You can refuse the second half.

If you welcome the second half of life, this is what you will find: you learn to hear "a deeper voice of God" than you heard before. "It will sound an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender, of soul, of 'common sense,' of destiny, of love, of an intimate stranger, of your deepest self." You can hear this voice in the second half of life precisely because of all the work you did in the first half; your very self is now a container strong enough to hold the call of the intimate stranger. You find that you can let go of things—pain, judgments, even the need to make judgments. You may find that you are reading a lot of poetry; you may find that you are reading the mystics, who seemed opaque to you before. There is a gravitas in this second half of life, writes Rohr, but it is "held up by a much deeper lightness."

As I sat with Rohr, as I read, I found that I was praying: for two friends currently divorcing, for three families struggling with drug addiction, for my ex-husband, for myself—my past self, my self yet-to-come. Rohr's framework, to put it simply, seems true. We all know people who are in that second half of life. They are the people about whom we say, *That is the person I want to be, the Christian I want to be, when I grow up.*

Falling Upward abounds with wisdom. But I do have one quibble: sometimes an unwelcome tone creeps into Rohr's prose—a tone of superiority toward those still in the first half of life, in particular a tone of unnuanced criticism of a church that, in Rohr's estimation, seems stuck in the first half. To wit: "Most people facing the important transformative issues of social injustice, divorce, failure, gender identity, an inner life of prayer, or any radical reading of the Gospel are usually bored and limited by the typical Sunday church agenda." Well, no. Some people in a crisis are "limited" by that "agenda"; others are nourished by it. Indeed, the church is where many people find their inner life of prayer; the church is the very body that sustains many people through a divorce. One wishes that an editor had picked up the red pen at these moments, because they are jarring—at odds with the generosity and capaciousness that generally characterize the book.

And one question: some post-Jungian psychoanalytic theorists have suggested that, contra Jung, a dramatic crisis may not be the necessary precondition of the kind of growth Jung describes. Similarly, I wonder if the path from building the self to hearing the intimate stranger, the path from ego to spiritual spaciousness, is always linear. Perhaps some of us move back and forth between the halves; perhaps we cycle through them, over and over again. Part of the paradox of Rohr's second half may be that only in that half of the spiritual life does one have the wisdom to

understand that however wonderful the nearness of the intimate stranger may be, however free and peaceful this new stage feels, we may not get to stay here either, any more than we got to stay in that ego-building stage that came before.