

Foreword by Brené Brown

Over
375,000
Copies
Sold

FALLING UPWARD

*A Spirituality for the
Two Halves of Life*

REVISED & UPDATED

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RICHARD ROHR

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 *Faith After Doubt* and *Do I Stay Christian?* (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, 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 us to explore. It sounds too good to 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 Healing Path*

“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 *Mystical Courage* and *The Corner of Fourth and Nondual*

“*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 unfolds—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. *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, PhD, author of *The Journey of Soul Initiation, Soulcraft, and Nature and the Human Soul*

“In *Falling Upward*, Fr. Richard Rohr’s wisdom illuminates the purpose and direction of our life journey. It turns out that our souls are engaged in a sacred dance that leads ‘beyond the strong opinions, needs, preferences, and demands of the first half of life’ toward the True Self and the ‘serene discipleship’ of the second half of life.” —The Rev. Dr. Barbara A. Holmes, author of *Joy Unspeakable, Crisis Contemplation, and Race and the Cosmos*

FALLING UPWARD

A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life



Revised and Updated

Richard Rohr

Foreword by Brené Brown

J JOSSEY-BASS™

A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2024 by Richard Rohr. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada and the United Kingdom.

ISBNs: 9781394185696 (Hardback), 9781394185719 (ePDF), 9781394185702 (ePub)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-750-4470, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Credits appear on page 129.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023043581

Cover Design: Paul McCarthy
Cover Art: © Getty Images | Salsabila Windadari / 500PX

Foreword	vii
The Invitation to a Further Journey	xi
Introduction	xv
1 The Two Halves of Life	1
2 The Hero's Journey	11
3 The First Half of Life	17
4 The Tragic Sense of Life	33
5 Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone	41
6 Necessary Suffering	47
7 Home and Homesickness	55
8 Amnesia and the Big Picture	61
9 A Second Simplicity	67
10 A Bright Sadness	75
11 The Shadowlands	81
12 New Problems and New Directions	87
13 Falling Upward	97
Afterword	103
Coda	111
Notes	115
Bibliography	123
The Author	127



The greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. . . . 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.

NOSTOS AND ALGA: RETURNING HOME IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

BY BRENÉ BROWN

 For many of us, the word “homesick” often conjures up images of a child’s fleeting sadness or their temporary yearning for home and family. In today’s culture, the emotion itself is often dismissed and trivialized as a juvenile feeling that we should be able to quickly shake off—it’s a fuzzy overnight-camp feeling, not a fierce emotional experience that is key to the human experience and central to our hardwired need for a sense of place and belonging. As I find myself grabbing Fr. Richard Rohr’s hand for guidance during what feels like the most important and rockiest life transition yet—the transformation from the first half of life to the second half of life—I am drawn to exploring the contours of homesickness to better understand why I can’t shake this unyielding longing for a home that exists only inside me.

As a researcher who studies emotion, I’ve found that the fuzzy overnight-camp feeling has an important history that oddly follows the first-to-second-half-of-life transformation. For many years, homesickness was considered a serious medical condition that sometimes resulted in death. In the late 1600s, Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer coined the medical term “nostalgia” to capture the homesickness he witnessed in patients who were living far from home. These patients were so overcome with the need to return that they stopped functioning and sometimes died. He created the term by combining the Greek words *nostos* (homecoming) and *alga* (pain). In many wars across history, including the US Civil War and the French Revolution, homesickness

and nostalgia were seen as threats to soldiers' physical and mental health. Strict restrictions were placed on music or songs that could incite the grief, desperation, and longing associated with homesickness.

So, what happened? Did adults just stop feeling homesick? Susan Matt, Presidential Distinguished Professor of History at Weber State University and author of *Homesickness: An American History*, explains:

In a society that values independence, ambition, and optimism, many adults feel compelled to repress their homesickness. Mobility is regarded as a time-honored American tradition, moving on a painless and natural activity. Those who feel grief at parting hide the emotion, believing it to be a sign of immaturity, maladjustment, and weakness. Instead of displaying homesickness, Americans express hopefulness and cheerfulness, two character attributes much valued in American society. Trepidations about breaking home ties must be subordinated to sunny hopes for the future. Homesickness must be repressed.¹

Fr. Richard might say that homesickness became problematic for first-half-of-life ambitions so we pathologized and infantilized those who experienced it.

While research and history have taught me about the power of homesickness, it's my intimate relationship with homesickness that fills me with a sense of reverence, awe, and respect for the emotion. As a child, the happiest place on earth for me was my grandmother's house. She was my person, and I was her person. There was a lot of turmoil in my house growing up and there was a lot of trauma in my grandmother's life, so we were for each other everything that was good about the world. We played cards, watched *Hee Haw*, and went to see movies that my parents wouldn't let me see. *Smokey and the Bandit* was our favorite. I loved defying my parents, and she loved Burt Reynolds. It was win-win. I lived for those hot summer weeks with her in San Antonio.

Yet every year I got desperately homesick after four or five days. I came to know and hate that feeling. I could sense it coming on—creeping into my mind and sliding across my shoulders and down my arms until the sorrow reached my hands and I would find myself emotionally reaching for my parents. Even as a child, I recognized homesickness as both an emotion and a physical yearning—a desperate grasping at something that was completely

out of reach. Homesickness was and is such a strange sadness. It takes the shape of low-grade grief one minute and restless desperation the next. It can crash down on us like a wave and steal our breath. Then, out of nowhere and without notice, it can pull back and we can ride the calm—for a little while.

After my grandmother died, I experienced an even more complex side of the emotion. I learned what it means to be homesick for a place that no longer exists. I still frequently make the trip from Houston to San Antonio, and for the first ten years after her death, I couldn't even look at the road sign for the exit to her street. Yes, I missed her, but I also missed that sense of place. Even today, I would give anything to sit with her in the backyard under the pecan tree, listening to the call of the mourning dove or the chirping of the cicadas—nature sounds that are nostalgic for many of us, yet sounds that I'm absolutely convinced are exclusive to Me-Ma's backyard.

A couple of years ago, my mom was diagnosed with rapid-onset dementia. As my sisters and I care for her, I'm forced to navigate a swirl of many emotions, including my old companion homesickness. It's been many decades since I've snuggled into my mother's lap, but, until very recently, I always found shelter in our shared memories. That soothing place is gone. I'm desperately homesick for that place.

I had not thought a lot about the role homesickness has played in my life until I reread *Falling Upward*. The first time I read about the transition from the first half of life and the embrace of the second half of life, I was way too deep in my own first-half-of-life energy to think the second half would ever be for me. But now, thanks to this book, I'm gaining an understanding of this transition and why my spiritual homesickness is more than emotional pain—it's a spiritual yearning.

Spiritual homesickness has been a constant in my life. It was not an everyday experience, but a predictable and always reoccurring desperation to find a sense of sacredness within me, not outside of me: my soul, my home, God in me. It was homesickness for a place that exists only inside me.

Through my thirties and forties, I would occasionally succumb to the yearning, drop everything, and run as fast as I could to *visit* the home within me. The door to my internal spiritual home would be one simple experience, one encounter with a thin place—maybe sitting in my car listening to Loretta Lynn sing “How Great Thou Art,” or an afternoon swim with God in Lake Travis, or one night praying the Daily Examen. But then, after that

visit, I would leave and go back to my first-half-of-life world. I'd describe this first-half-of-life spirituality as the ebb and flow of *nostos* and *alga*, homecoming and pain.

Over the past two years, I've found that I'm more spiritually homesick than not. Spiritual homesickness has become an almost daily dulling grief. It's not depression or exhaustion. It's an uncomfortable knowing that I'm coming to the end of one thing and the beginning of the next. I'm leaving and arriving. There's fear, but there's also joyful anticipation.

Today, when I return home to the place in me where God dwells, I'm no longer interested in making it a quick visit so I can run back to the world of "what other people think" and "what I can get done." Today, I can barely be dragged out of the house. I'm drawn to different conversations and deeper connections. I want this sacred space to be my home, not somewhere I visit to buttress my "real life" that's on the outside of my connection with God. I'm starting to wonder if my *alga*, my pain, is fueled by my separation from God and from my True Self.

When it comes to the end of one thing and the beginning of another, Fr. Richard writes that good spiritual directors should be talking to us openly about death. Let me assure you, based on this requirement, Fr. Richard is a very good and tenacious spiritual director. I hold his words and ideas close to my heart because he has walked with me through many fires and never pulled any punches. Based on this book, I think Fr. Richard might tell me that I'm experiencing the death of visiting God and the birth of living with God and through God.

Don't get me wrong—leaving the first half of life is scary. Most of us have the first-half-of-life hustle down. The thing is, I'm just never, ever homesick for the first half of my life when I walk away from it. I'm fearful about leaving the rules I understand and the markers for success that I've established for my life. But I don't miss it. Maybe I'm not homesick for the first half of life because it's really never been my true home.



To Fr. Richard: Thank you for your oversized heart, your always curious mind, and those outstretched hands that so many of us reach out to hold, squeeze, and occasionally high-five.

A journey into the second half of our 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 over fifty 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 (c. 287–c. 212 BCE) 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 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 (1931–2021) told me on a 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 absolutely 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 stated this quite so perfectly as the literally *inimitable* Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) in his John Duns Scotus–inspired poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.”²

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*. We 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 for which you were really born. 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.