

Richard Rohr, *Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) ISBN 978-0-470-90775-7 Hardback, xxxvii, 199 pages

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

I'm 39, so have been thinking and reflecting about my first half of life, and dreaming about my next half – getting ready for my midlife crisis. As such I have appreciated reading *Falling Upwards* by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr. It is a guidebook is useful for those of us in the midst of midlife transition, but also for those who are older wanting to understand what they have gone through, or for those who are younger wanting to plan and prepare.

Rohr invites us to welcome and celebrate the journey from the first half of life to the second half. The first half of life does tend to be driven by a desire to establish ourselves, to build our careers and/or start our families, to mortgage to buy a house. As we get older – and especially as we encounter tragedy, confusion, failure, difficult relationships or perplexing ideas – we realise our boundaries and security were not as sure as we had presumed. Rohr suggests that almost all people will face, at some time in their life, at least one situation they cannot control, change or understand. Navigated successfully, this is often what helps us move on to our second half of life. We fall and realise our frailty. But instead of falling down, Rohr says the journey is about falling *upwards*. It is a positive thing to realise our frailty. It is helpful to pause and ask what is it all about? At different points in our life, we are invited to respond to the question, as Rohr quotes Mary Oliver, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (p.1).

In the first half of life (however many years that takes us) we seek to build what makes us significant, work out how we will support ourselves and who will go with us; in the second half we want to take more time for pure friendship, appreciating beauty, communing with nature. This helps us shine and be the sort of people that shows we are the delight of God. But it takes courage and imagination to confront the shadows in our life and to take the journey of *falling upwards*.

Rohr uses the story of Odysseus from mythology to help guide and give meaning to our journey or "odyssey" through two halves of life. Written by Homer around 700BC, *The Odyssey* is the hero's journey of Odysseus returning from the Trojan War. Avoiding gods and monsters, losing his men, his memory and his boat itself, he finally makes it home to his family on their island. But, just at the point a good Hollywood ending could scroll down, Odysseus is called on a second journey. There was something more than settling down into traditional expectations.

Odysseus is led to carry a boat oar and trek across the mainland until he gets to a people who know nothing of the sea or boats, and someone would think it is a winnowing shovel, and then he could sacrifice to the gods and return home and die peacefully as an old man. So he carries this

oar, the tool for driving his boat in his first half of life; but a traveller sees it as a winnowing shovel, a tool for separating grain from chaff (or wheat from weeds). And he plants the oar and leaves it there. What had been so significant to him he had to leave behind. Rohr reflects:

His oar (or occupation) had become a tool for inner work, a means for knowing the difference between wheat and chaff, essentials and nonessentials, which is precisely the turn toward discernment and subtlety that we come to in the second half of life. ... Now he can *go home* because he has, in fact, *come home* to his true and full self. His sailing and oaring days of mere "outer performance" are over, and he can now rest in the simplicity and ground of his own inner life. He is free to stop his human *doing* and can at last enjoy his human *being* (p.94).

The well-known VISA card promotion line is "Don't leave home without it", but spiritual pilgrimage advice is "Leave home to find it" (p.85). Rohr suggests that to find ourselves, and to move into the best of what our second half of life offers, we have to be prepared to leave what is familiar: "Many just fall in love with their first place and position, as an extension of themselves, and spend their whole life building a white picket fence around it" (p46). Leaving home is not necessarily geographical but it is being prepared to leave the familiar behind and stretch outside of our comfort zones. In trying new paths we can encounter God in profound ways – part of the excitement of the second half of life

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