

Falling Upward

Introduction & Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, help me to understand and appreciate the spiritual growth you are nurturing in me. Feed me that I might grow closer to you and others. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- If you had to pick one milestone that halved your life thus far, what would it be?
- If you had to pick one milestone that halved your spiritual life, what would it be?

- **Scripture** – Read Luke 5:36-39

- What is your interpretation of this parable?

- **Introduction – Key Points**

- Life's 2nd half isn't strictly chronological; some young people, especially sufferers, are already there
 - Do you know anyone who fits this mold?
- Our institutions/churches cater to the tasks of the first half of life
 - Why?
- *Thomas Merton (American monk) – "We may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall."*
- Scott Peck – Most Westerners are spiritually lazy. We stay on the current path, even if it's going nowhere.
 - Do you agree?
- *Some kind of falling is necessary – "necessary suffering."*
- *The falling is more "done to you" than something you do. Sometimes nonreligious people are more open to this change in strategy, rather than religious people who have their salvation project all planned out.*
- Spiritual growth happens more when we do something wrong than when we do something right.
 - Do you agree? Can you share personal examples?
- 2nd half of life – constant communion with God; 1st half's techniques/formulas/sacraments were just a dress rehearsal for the real life – one of constant intentional prayer
 - Reflections on this?

- **Chapter 1**

- Think about your childhood. As you faced your life ahead, what were the questions that went through your mind?
- [16] How do you respond to Fr. Richard saying "The task of the first half of life is to create a *container* for one's life and answer the first essential questions: 'What makes me significant?' 'How can I support myself?' and 'Who will go with me?'"
- As you reflect on your life, do you see deeper meaning in your childhood experiences now, than when you were living them? Examples?
- You can't go directly to the 2nd half by reading books about it. You must let God edge you forward. "God has no grandchildren. God only has children."
 - What does this mean to you?
- In our formative years, we are so self-preoccupied we don't spend time on pure friendship, useless beauty, communion with nature, simply living.

- True for you?
 - You have to build an ego structure first – to “feel special.” If you’re mirrored well early in life, you don’t have to spend the rest of your life looking in Narcissus’s mirror or begging attention.
 - Do you think you’re done building this ego structure?
 - *Two key insights of steps and stages of growth:*
 1. *You can only understand earlier stages from the wider perspective of later stages*
 2. *From your own level of development you can only stretch yourself to comprehend people just a bit beyond yourself*
 - Mature societies were meant to be led by elders, seniors, saints, and the “initiated” rather than the blind leading the blind. Those who are not true leaders just affirm people at their immature level and are loved and elected for doing so.
 - Can you cite examples of immature leaders – political, social, or at work?
 - Plato and Jefferson said democracy wasn’t the best form of government, just the safest. A truly wise monarch would be more effective.
 - Responses?
 - If change and growth aren’t programmed into your spirituality, you’ll be stuck in the status quo, protecting your current position as if it were God.
 - To what extent are change and growth programmed into your spirituality?
 - Much of spiritual and pastoral work of churches is ineffective at real transformation.
 - Supporting examples? Examples to the contrary?
 - *We have not clarified the differences, needs, and sometimes conflicting challenges of the two halves of our lives.*
- **[Optional from *A Companion Journal*] Experiential Exercises**
 - Solicit experiences from anyone who conducted these exercises
 - **Other Reflections?**

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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we don't usually think of ourselves as heroes, but help us discern how we might be heroic for your cause as we journey through life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- Who are some of your favorite literary heroes?
 - Were they on any sort of journey?
- How would you describe a hero?

- **Scripture** – Read Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 14:25-27

- What do these passages have in common?

- **Chapter 2**

- [18] Classic heroic journey
 - Live in a world they take as given and sufficient
 - Core religious problem – “divine DNA”
 - What does that mean to you?
 - Are you in touch with your own divine DNA?
 - Leave home on an adventure
 - What is the importance in leaving home?
 - When have you been called to leave your comfort zone?
 - How has that affected your spiritual growth?
 - Find their real problem (wounding)
 - Do you agree such a wounding or trial is critical in a hero's journey?
 - Has there been or is there a wound in your life, or is there one now that has opened up your spiritual understanding?
 - First task is just a warm-up act
 - “Most people confuse their life situation with their actual life, which is an underlying flow beneath the everyday events. This deeper discovery is largely what religious people mean by ‘finding their soul.’”
 - What does this mean?
 - What is this deeper movement beneath the surface of your everyday tasks?
 - Return home and know the place for the first time
 - How have you returned home and known it for the first time?
- [19] “The hero is a generative person, concerned about the next generation. They live in “deep time” and not just in their personal small time.”
 - What does this mean?
 - Can you think of examples of heroes living in deep time?
- Fr. Rohr claims that this classic hero definition is different from our modern-day definition of hero. “To be a celebrity or a mere survivor today is often confused with heroism.”
 - How much of our earlier description at the beginning of this session maps to his classic definition?
 - What separates a hero from a survivor?
- [21] Fr. Rohr wonders whether we no longer have real obedience to God's call to leave our homes and comfort zones.

- Do you think that's true?
 - [22] Fr. Rohr proposes that many aren't obedient to the call because they have not yet finished their first task of building their initial house well. "To build your house well is, ironically, to be nudged beyond its doors."
 - Does this ring true to you?
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Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, make us aware of the structure we crave while at the same time liberating us for growth through failure. In your Son's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- What do you consider the most important values for all cultures? *Law, tradition, custom, authority, boundaries, and morality*

- **Scripture** – Read Matthew 5:17, 7:21-48

- In what ways do you consider Jesus a rule-follower vs. a rule-breaker?

- **Chapter 3**

- What are examples of things you rebelled against, or at least pushed back, in your childhood?
- What are examples of boundaries which you're glad are in place?
- Can you think of a time in your life when you fell, and eventually were the better for the falling?
- [30] If you want the opposite [someone who will *not* do a good job], hire someone who has been coddled...and whose basic egocentricity has never been challenged"
 - Have you witnessed the regression of the American student body and workforce in this way, as does Rohr?
- Who can you think of who has used their wounded life to serve, as opposed to just a "ticket to sympathy"?
- Who in your life has provided you with "conditional love," setting hard expectations and demanding more of you?
- Where have you seen members of our society try to reinstate "the good old days"?
- [46] "*If this inner and critical voice has kept you safe for many years as your inner voice of authority, you may end up not being able to hear the real voice of God.*"
 - Have you experience this in yourself or others?
- Do you agree with Rohr that you must reach a point in life when you "discharge the loyal [strictly law-abiding] soldier" and move on to a less structured form of living? Are you already there?

- **[Optional from *A Companion Journal*] Experiential Exercises**

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Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord, help us to become aware of failure and sin. Rather than stumbling blocks, let them be teachable moments that ultimately draw us closer to you. In Your name we pray. Amen.

- **[YouTube Video](#)** [18:52-32:53 - Up to the story about his mother giving things away - "That's where you naturally should be moving"]

- *Tragedy is when everyone loses*
- *People are operating out of self-destructive behavior that they cannot not do ("addiction")*
 - *Scriptures refer to this as devils/demons which Jesus drove out*
- *Necessary suffering is something you need to be taught in the first half of life*
- Do your children think they are "the center of the world"?
 - When did they come to the realization they weren't?
- Do Americans, more than anyone else, deny failure and pursue success at all costs?
 - Does this make it harder to believe the Gospel?
- Does the prospect of a second journey excite or frighten you?
- Do you agree that Christianity isn't about leaving, but rather about protecting?
- *Maturity is the "winnowing fan" - being able to discern good from evil*
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 4**

- [53] "Life is inherently tragic"
 - What is your reaction to this claim?
- *"life is not, nor ever has been, a straight line forward." It's characterized more by exception and disorder than by total or perfect order.*
- [55] Do you see Fr. Rohr's point when he proposes that when Jesus and Paul say to honor the least of the brothers and sisters, they are saying we have the most to learn from these humans on the edge of normal?
- "Just the existence of a single mentally challenged...person...should make us change any of our theories about the necessity of some kind of correct thinking as the definition of 'salvation'"
 - Thoughts?
- [56] "Every time God forgives us... God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us."
 - Do you agree?
- [58] Jung - "where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold."
 - Where have you found gold when you stumbled?
- *Jesus doesn't get angry at sinners. He gets angry at those who don't admit they've sinned.*
- Organized religion has not been known for its inclusiveness.
 - Supporting examples? Examples to the contrary?
- [61] Luke 11:24-26; "I do not think you should get rid of your sin until you have learned what it has to teach you."
 - Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do you think sin is a necessary part of learning?

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Chapters 5 & 6

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we feel so ill-equipped to handle our suffering. Help us to better understand why you allow suffering to happen, and strengthen our faith in the process. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **[YouTube Video](#)** [32:50-38:05 up until "...shows I'm the best and shows I'm superior"]

- Do you consider birth and death "spiritual experiences"
 - Hospice is turning a medical event into a spiritual event
- American culture is the only one which idealizes teenagers over elders
 - Do you agree?
 - Do you want to be a teenager or 65+? How might you want to be a teenager?
- How are we guilty of "Kindergarten Christianity"?
- Other reflections?

- **Ice Breaker**

- What examples of suffering can you think of from the Bible? *Jesus, Job, Exodus, Daniel, Peter & John, Paul, David, Jeremiah, Joseph*
- How did suffering affect each of these individuals?

- **Scripture**

- Have different volunteers read... 1 Peter 5:10, Psalm 34:19, 2 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Peter 4:1, 1 Peter 3:14, Romans 5:3-4, Philippians 1:29, Matthew 10:38
- What do these verses tell you about suffering?

- **Chapters 5 & 6**

- Talk about a time when a situation took you beyond your resources to deal with it.
 - What was the impact on your life? Did it make you feel free because you realized you weren't in charge of falling?
 - Is such an event necessary in our spiritual journey/maturity?
- [66] What does "being out of the driver's seat" or "giving up control to the Real Guide" mean to you?
- [71] What "goad" do you kick against in your life?
- What things in nature involve "necessary suffering"? *butterfly; salmon; bees stinging for survival*
- [73] "'life is hard.' We really are our own worst enemy when we deny this."
 - What does this mean? Do you agree?
- [74] *To fruitfully criticize something... "You must unlock spiritual things from the inside, and not by throwing rocks from outside, which is always too easy and too self-aggrandizing."*
- [76] "Catholicism is the 'one true church' only when it points beyond itself to the 'one true Mystery,' and offers itself as the training ground for both human liberation and divine union."
 - What does it mean to point beyond oneself to the one true Mystery?
- [79] "If we lived forever, they say, we would never take life seriously or learn to love what is."
 - Does this make sense to you?
- "Love only happens in the realm of freedom."
 - Do you agree?
- [82] Jesus "undoes" the 4th commandment when he says you must leave your father or mother.
 - How do you reconcile this?
- [82] Do you have any personal experience with the "crab bucket syndrome"?

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Chapter 7

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, we long for home in its many forms. Give us a renewed sense of being home to your Holy Spirit in us. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- When I say "home," what comes to mind?

- **Scripture**

- Read John 14:23; Mark 10:29-30

- **Chapter 7**

- [87] Jung – "Life is a luminous pause between two great mysteries, which themselves are one."
 - What does this mean to you?
- Why might sad or abused children still long for "home" or "Mother" and yearn to return to it?
- Rohr argues that "home" is the "one great mystery" revealed to us from the beginning.
 - Do you agree?
- When have you experienced homesickness?
- Can you explain what Rohr means by being both driven and called forward by a deep homesickness – a "desirous dissatisfaction"?
- [90] "90% of people seem to live 90% of their lives on cruise control, which is to be unconscious"
 - What's your reaction?
- "Home is another word for the Spirit that we are, our True Self in God."
 - What does this mean to you?
- What is your opinion on the nature of the Holy Spirit?
- If "she" is there from the beginning, as Rohr suggests, then how do we reconcile Pentecost?
- Is there a difference between the inner voice of the Holy Spirit and conscience?
- "We seriously doubt there is any vital reality to the spiritual world, so we hear no life-changing voices – true even for many who go to church, temple, or mosque."
 - Could this be God's way of interacting with us and we're just missing the Source?
- [93] "God seems to have created things that continue to create and recreate themselves from the inside out. It is no longer God's one-time creation or evolution; rather, God's form of creation precisely is evolution."
 - How does this strike you?
 - Do you think the way we evolve is predestined or is even God surprised by the way his world is changing?
- [95] "The shape of evil is much more superficiality and blindness than the usually listed 'hot sins.'"
 - Does this ring true for you?
- What's the difference between "the starter kit of *belief*" and the actual inner *knowing*?
- Other observations/insights from the chapter?

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Chapters 8 & 9

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for calling us to you, and instilling a sense of faith in us. We thank you for a faith that allows both for healthy questioning and sustaining conviction. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- What are your thoughts on heaven and hell?

- **Scripture**

- Have volunteers read John 14:2-4, Matthew 22:29-33, and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

- **Chapter 8**

- [97] "Life is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we already are, but it is a self that we largely do not know."
 - Nature vs. nurture – do you agree that who you are is defined at your birth?
- [98] Read Wordsworth poem
 - What does this poem say to you? Do you agree?
- [99] Rohr discusses our faith being built on the faith of the apostles.
 - What is your impression of the apostles?
 - Are they your role models for discipleship?
- [100] If "heaven" and "hell" are "present experiences," what does that mean?
- [101] "All are in heaven as soon as they live in union."
 - Do you agree?
- "If you accept a punitive notion of God... Absurd universe where most people are more loving than God"
- Fr. Rohr suggests that you choose to be in heaven or hell by choosing to be in union or in separation.
 - Can you give examples of how this might be the case?

- **Chapter 9**

- [105] Rohr talks about "not being in Kansas anymore" when he was educated by the Franciscans and moved away from the conservative, literal religion of his parents.
 - Do you have a time when you felt you weren't in Kansas anymore?
- *Simplicity – drive toward unification/inclusivity rather than viewing the universe as "turning around the one thing" with the one thing being your personal viewpoint*
- [110] "Creative doubt keeps me with a perpetual "beginner's mind"
 - How would you characterize yourself?
 - Where do you fall on the spectrum of 1=blind follower ... 10=aggressive doubter
- Would you prefer a "touch of the magic wand" kind of God to an "include us in the process" kind of God?
- [112] Do you agree that "it is probably necessary to eliminate most doubt when you are young"... as a survival technique?
- At what point in life did you "learn ignorance"?
- "As the body cannot live without food, so the soul cannot live without meaning."
 - What does this mean to you? Do you agree?
- Other observations/insights from the chapter?

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Chapters 10 & 11

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord, help us wade through a world of criticism and negativity, and adopt a spirit of humble grace and acceptance. We pray in your Son's holy name. Amen.

- **YouTube Video** [38:05-49:04 up until "...entice you, invite you, announce to you, and tell you, there is something more...because the second journey really never ends."]
 - What does Rohr mean by "We're creating elderly people, but not elders."
 - Which elders can you think of who demonstrate the gravitas and "It's going to be OK" attitude?
 - Do you agree that we have a high percentage of people who are at an adolescent level (impressed by loudness, "or" rather than "both/and", living the lie to put themselves and their race/country at the top)
 - How do we suffer from "adult Christianity"?
 - How do we break through this predicament?
- **Chapter 10**
 - As you've aged, have you found yourself less in need of eliminating the negative, dwelling on old hurts, and feeling the need to punish?
 - Do you spend less time differentiating yourself and more time finding things in common [120]?
 - [117] Frontal attacks on evil produce other kinds of evil.
 - In what ways do you see this as true?
 - [118] Do you spend more of your time thinking about the 10 Commandments than the Beatitudes?
 - Try to list the 10 Commandments as in Exodus 20. *No other gods, no idols, don't take the Lord's name in vain, Sabbath, honor father and mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't give false testimony, don't covet*
 - Try to list the 8 Beatitudes as in Matthew 5. *poor in spirit, mourn, meek, hunger/thirst, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted*
 - Why do we know the commandments better than the beatitudes?
 - Quotes
 - [122] *"Ironically, we are more than ever before in a position to change people – but we do not need to – and that makes all the difference."*
 - [123] *"Your concern is not so much to have what you love anymore, but to love what you have – right now."*
 - [124] *"Strangely, all of life's problems, dilemmas, and difficulties are now resolved not by negativity, attack, criticism, force, or logical resolution, but always by falling into a larger 'brightness.'"*
 - What does he mean?
- **Chapter 11**
 - [127] *"Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see."*
 - "Be especially careful therefore of any idealized role...minister, mother, doctor, nice person, professor, moral believer, or president of this or that."
 - What personas/roles do you list to others most often when describing your life?
 - How do these personas lend themselves to larger shadows?
 - Think about how you usually respond to someone who points out faults or criticizes your actions.
 - Are you able to see the friendship in their message?
 - What might be a helpful phrase you can recite to yourself when faced with such a message?

- [130] Spiritual maturity is growth in seeing, and humans take a huge leap in the final years/months/days of life, as any hospice worker will attest.
 - Have you witnessed this in others?
 - [132] *“the closer you get to the Light, the more of your shadow you see. Thus truly holy people are always humble people.”*
 - [135] *“Holy sadness” / compunction (feeling of guilt that follows sinning) – necessary sadness; necessary shadow boxing*

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Chapter 12

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear God, we thank you for more intimate groups of friends, like this one. Help us to nourish close faith-anchored relationships both inside and outside this circle. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

- **YouTube Video** [49:04-54:08 up until “That’s what a ‘second half of life’ person knows.”]

- “Learn and obey the rules very well, so you’ll know how to break them properly”
 - What metaphorical stop signs do you find yourself appropriately and understandably running through?
- Faith – “putting together knowing and not knowing”
 - Does the “not knowing” increase your faith?
- Other reflections?

- **Scripture** – Read Galatians 2

- Where do you see our church falling into the trap Paul describes to the Galatians?

- **Chapter 12**

- [137] Have you found your circle of friends and confidants has grown smaller and more intimate as you’ve matured?
- [139] “two or three gathered in my name” is the best way to combat becoming “churchified” (associating yourself with the practices of the larger institution and losing the opportunity to absorb the Gospel and do critical wisdom thinking)
 - Do the corporate practices of the larger church get in the way of your spiritual development?
- [140] “The ego – and most institutions – demand a tit-for-tat universe, while the soul swims in a sea of abundance, grace, and freedom.”
 - What does he mean?
- [141] Fr. Rohr talks about waiting to cast your seeds on “receptive soil,” and that such soil is more commonly found outside of the church than within.
 - Where do you find the most receptive soil?
- *Both-And Thinking*
 - [145] *“if your politics do not become more compassionate and inclusive, I doubt whether you are on the second journey”*
 - *“we learn to ‘incorporate the negative,’ learn from what we used to exclude”*
 - [147] *“Your frame should grow larger as you move toward the Big Picture in which God creates all and loves all”*
 - [148] *“Inside such [dualistic] entrapment, most people do not see things as they are; rather, they see things as they are*
 - When do you find yourself being most inclusive? Exclusive?
- Other reflections?

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Chapter 13

- **Opening Prayer**
Amen.
- **YouTube Video** [54:08-1:08:15 up until “who surely loves you more than you love yourself. Thank you.”]
 - [“sanctimonious people”] Do you ever feel that “if this is the goal, I don’t want to go there”?
 - Are there any “methods to admire”?
 - “Transcend and Include” – How does this strike you? In what ways are you transcending? Including?
 - Does it always take an elder to show you the “lens” through which you can find out “what’s it’s all about”?
 - Are there any cups you think are deserving of being overfilled – pointing out the ritualization?
 - Why did Fr. Rohr choose the story from John? Who is dressing you? *God*
 - Other reflections?
- **Chapter 13**
 - [153] “Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life”
 - Do you agree? How do you view your second half of life?
 - [154/5] Read passage on Mirroring which includes highlighted “Good people will mirror goodness in us, which is why we love them so much.”
 - Can you think of any good people who mirror goodness in you?
 - [157] In 2nd half of life, people have less power to infatuate you, but also less power to control or hurt you
 - Is this true for you?
 - [158] “Communities and commitment can form around suffering much more than around how wonderful or superior we are.”
 - Are Christian communities formed more around suffering or superiority?
- **Coda – Thomas Merton Poem**
 - Read “When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple” on p.162, a stanza at a time
 - In your own words, interpret each of the five stanza as you go
- **[Optional from *A Companion Journal*] Experiential Exercises**
 - Solicit experiences from anyone who conducted these exercises
- **Other Reflections?**

References for material:

- [*Falling Upward, Revised and Updated: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*](#)
(This is a revised version from the one we used with these lessons. The material should be pretty close, though)
- [*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life -- A Companion Journal*](#)
(page numbers from the text are noted in brackets [#] preceding quotes or relevant passages; note that e-book page numbers can differ from hardcopy books, but should be close)

Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey