

Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life

Study Guide

Chapter One: The Two Halves of Life

Discussion:

Thinking about your childhood faith, what do you remember believing? What was important to you? How has your faith changed since then? Do you feel you have been able to make your own 'discoveries of faith'?

How does the question "is that all there is?" connect to your own life experience?

As you reflect on your life, do you see deeper meaning in your junior life experiences that you did when they were happening? How would you characterize your own wider perspective if you are in the second stage of life? If you're still developing your container, can you describe someone you know who is living their 'awesome content'?

In what ways could Jesus' command to "change your mind" (Mark 1:15) affect your personal journey? Spend some time thinking about the difficult situations and relationships in your life; how might they be challenging and inviting you to change your mind?

Experiential:

Through the next week, pay attention to the world around you. At work, notice how inclusively people treat each other. Watch for the presence or absence of patience and understanding around you. Observe adults showing signs of compassion and empathy. In your interaction with media, watch for signs of either-or or both-and thinking. Spend some time thinking about how you could use these observations to improve the quality of your own relationships and interactions.

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Chapter Two: The Hero and Heroine's Journey

Discussion:

Over your life journey, when have you been called or invited to go beyond your comfort zone? How have these challenges impacted your spiritual growth? What experiences or resources do you think people need to make a leap of faith seem more possible?

How would you describe the difference between your current situation and what Rohr calls your actual life? Do you have a sense that there is a deeper movement beneath your everyday tasks? If so, are you able to share with others about that experience?

Who in your life has shared with you the wisdom they have gained from their life lessons? How has their wisdom impacted you? When you have the opportunity to pass on your life wisdom, what questions might you ask of the person to help you know what s/he needs?

Experiential:

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Chapter Three: The First Half of Life

Discussion:

Share a 'necessary fall' you've experienced; a loss of job, reputation, self-image, relationship or moral failure that you had to own up to. What did that experience teach you about balance? About yourself? About God?

If you have never let yourself fall or perceive that you have not been allowed to fall, what impact might that be having on your life?

How would you describe unconditional love? Think of someone who loved you that way and describe how that felt. Think of someone who has offered you conditional or demanding love and describe how that felt. Do you sense a value in having been loved both unconditionally and conditionally?

As you reflect on your life, can you identify some of the times when you've pulled by your inner voice (your loyal soldier) to make "safe" choices rather than choices that you might have sensed God was calling you to make? Are there times when a gentle nudge from God or even an ambush by God have moved you to make a riskier choice? How has your life changed as a result in either case?

Experiential:

This week, reflect on your capacity for giving and receiving love. Consider a relationship where it is difficult to receive love; consider the story that diminishes your openness and invite yourself to question it.

Consider a relationship in which it is challenging to give love; consider the story you carry that makes it difficult to love. Invite yourself to question that story. Hold these people in your heart during your prayer time. See them surrounded by love and you surrounded by love.

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Chapter Four: The Tragic Sense of Life

Discussion:

Consider the statement, 'life is inherently tragic'. What does that mean to you? How does faith help (or not help) you deal with the contradictions of life?

Have you experienced God's compassion and forgiveness? Consider and describe to the group if you're willing, how it feels to accept that forgiveness. Did the experience move you to 'trust and seek love God' more deeply? Does feeling forgiven change how you relate to others in your life?

How do you respond to Rohr's statement, 'I do not think you should get rid of your sin until you have learned what it has to teach you'? Are you able to share something that sin/brokenness has taught you?

Experiential:

This week, consider if you are avoiding any unnecessary suffering (or change) now. And think about what is waiting to be born in you if you were able to be courageous and act regardless of your fear of the cost.

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Chapter 5: Stumbling Over the Stumbling Stone

Discussion:

Think about a time when a situation or relationship took you beyond your skills and resources; when you could not fix, control, explain or change things. Were you able to acknowledge your inability to fix or control the situation – and were you able to let go of your need/desire to control things and surrender. How did you feel when you realized you were not in charge of the falling? Do you, like many of us, need to experience this “letting go” again and again?

When has your inability to “get out of the driver’s seat” or “let go” gotten in your way (unnecessary suffering)? Has that experience opened new space in your life for learning or loving differently?

What do you kick against in your life? What might accepting that situation teach you that you have not learned in your years of resisting it? Can you imagine how acceptance might lead to growth? Or conversely, can you see how resisting is not accomplishing anything; may actually be getting in your way?

Experiential:

Think back on your experiences of precious things that you have lost and then found. Remember how you felt when you realized the loss – and when the lost item was found. Remember those inner celebrations you’ve experienced. Remember those times when the precious item wasn’t found – how did you recover from that loss? Were you able to make room in your life for new precious things or perhaps value things/situations/relationships differently?

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Chapter Six: Unnecessary Suffering

Discussion:

Why is it easy and makes us feel *better* to “throw rocks from outside”? What kinds of experiences help you shift your perspective to “inside”.

Describe your own experience with the “crab bucket syndrome” (when you try to crawl out but others pull you back in) within your family, your social networks, faith community or work setting. What affects your ability to move to the second journey? How does the voice of the group affect your spiritual choices? If you’re comfortable, share specific situations that you feel pull you back in; prevent you from moving forward.

What does the phrase “leave home to find it” mean to you? Think about your favourite “homes” – those things or ideas or relationships that validate your outlook on life; that make you feel safe. Sometimes it’s illusions, prejudices and carried hurts that feel like a safe home for us; think about where this might be true in your life. Share in your group as you feel comfortable.

Experiential:

Remember a story or parable about someone’s falling and being redeemed (biblical or otherwise). Choose someone in the story with whom you can identify. Perhaps begin as the hero. Let your imagination run free and allow yourself to play out the role of the person in the story. Would you make the same choices? Think about the truth that the story offers you in your role. What qualities or what events allowed the person to fall, and what allowed the person to be redeemed?

Now choose another character and play out the story from that point of view. How are the two roles played out differently? How would your choices have been different from the characters you chose?

What about these characters would you like to see revealed in you if someone were to tell a story about your fall and redemption?

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Chapter Seven: Home and Homesickness

Discussion:

What things in your life feel like “chaff” or nonessential? How might you eliminate them or give them less energy? What things seem more like “wheat” – essentials that give meaning and purpose to your life? How can you give more energy to those life-giving things?

Does thinking of your soul as a homing device or inner compass that always points you towards “home “ reflect your own experience in any way? If so, can you share how it feels when you’re paying attention to that inner guide – and conversely, when you’re not paying attention?

Rohr suggests that evil is more about superficiality and blindness than about consciously malicious acts. How does that echo your own experience of your self or your observations of others?

Have you found that God is in the depths of every experience, your successes and your failings? If you’re comfortable, please share an example of that with your group.

Experiential:

Recall a situation where you have experienced life at a very deep level (e.g. loving someone very deeply; walking with someone through death; felt inextricably linked to a sense of the Divine). Close your eyes and recreate that experience in vivid detail. Based on that experience, create a list of what things in life are certain. Reflect on that list every day this week and write (draw, create music, dance) your insights at the end of the week.

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Chapter Eight: Amnesia and the Big Picture

Discussion:

How would you describe what Rohr calls your “True Self”? How do you think people come to know their true selves? Who or what helped you to uncover your true self? Who or what hindered the process for you?

Have you ever had to “perform” in a situation where you felt like you had to convince people you were smart enough or religious enough or worthy enough? What did you achieve in that “winner/loser” situation? And what did you have to give up?

What might you have to unlearn (have amnesia about) from your religious education in order to embrace Rohr’s description of heaven; “How could Jesus ask us to bless, forgive, and heal our enemies which he clearly does (Matthew 5:43-48) unless God is doing it first and always? Jesus told us to love our enemies because he saw his Father doing it all the time, and all spirituality is merely the ‘imitation of God’ (Ephesians 5:1)...if your notion of heaven is based on exclusion of anybody else, then it is by definition *not* heaven.”

Experiential:

Pay special attention this week to how you respond to conversations or behaviours when you are among family, friends, and strangers from the perspective of heaven and hell as being NOW. Walk through your week noticing whether you experience yourself in heaven or hell moment by moment. Notice how your behaviours in these two “states” are different, and notice whether others respond to you differently.

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Chapter Nine: A Second Simplicity

Discussion:

Do you see a need for increased inclusivity in your church? How about in your own life? How has your ability to be inclusive grown on your spiritual journey? Where does *otherness* or *newness* threaten you currently?

We observe people feeling safe, trusting, loving and invited in their relationship with God while others feel fearful, judged, wanting, and unsure of their welcome with God. What best describes your relationship with God and what has shaped that relationship?

How do you understand the relationship between those who are in the first half of life and the elders Rohr talks about in this chapter? How would you distinguish between someone being an elder socially and an elder spiritually? How have elders in your life helped you?

Are there first half-of-life people you know for whom you do or you might function as an elder? What do or what might you offer them from your second half-of-life perspective?

Experiential:

Sit quietly this week to contemplate forgiveness. Think back over your life, naming situations in which you wanted forgiveness. Now hold in you awareness those in your life whom you need to forgive. Hold your need for forgiveness and your need to forgive in your heart prayerfully inviting the Holy Spirit to be with you as you let go of hurt and anger.

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Chapter Ten: A Bright Sadness

Discussion:

Rohr discusses the idea that in the second half of life, we pay more attention to what we share in common with others rather than highlighting our difference. How have you noticed that in your own life? In what ways does this focus on commonalities help you to be more accepting of others' behaviours and differences?

What is your understanding of Rohr's comment that the Eight Beatitudes speak more potently to second-half of life people than the Ten Commandments?

Generative people believe "their God is no longer small, punitive or tribal." Erik Erikson defines generative people as those eager and able to generate life from their abundance and for the benefit of those in generations to come. What are the characteristics that you might expect to observe in a generative person? Do you consider yourself a generative person? How might you become more generative?

"Just watch true elders sitting in a circle of conversation; they are often defining the center, depth, and circumference of the dialogue just by being present...When elders speak, they need very few words to make their point." In conversation with those you might identify as elders, what do you notice about their contributions? What would you say about their "bright sadness and sober happiness"?

Experiential:

This week spend some time thinking about certainty. Have you noticed that you have fewer moments of certainty? What has replaced your certainty? As you think about living with less certainty, notice how your body feels. Invite that awareness to stay with you during the week as the next situation arises where your need for certainty gets in the way of the peace of unknowing.

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Chapter Eleven: The Shadowlands

Discussion:

“Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see...it is like a double blindness keeping you from seeing – and being – your best and deepest self.” When has it been easier for you to act as your shadow; to play roles in your life? Is the reward of playing roles worth the sense of hiding your true self? Or does the risk of discovering your best self outweigh the rewards of meeting others’ expectations?

Rohr writes, “Spiritual maturity is largely a growth in seeing and full seeing seems to take most of our lifetime.” What do you see more fully now than you did in the first half of your life? What clues do you use to know when you might need to invite a different perspective?

How can friends best offer feedback to you that will invite you to embrace your true self? How have you experienced receiving feedback from friends or family that helped you to see or be more fully your best and deepest self?

Experiential:

In the week ahead, observe your response to others. Watch for heightened reactions that seem in hindsight to be out of proportion to the moment. As soon as you are able, write a description of the interaction as closely as you remember it. When your reaction has calmed, reread your account of the incident. With compassion, identify the part of your shadow self that was exposed at that point. Reflect on what you have discovered. Invite that piece of your shadow into your heart and graciously hold it there in the coming days.

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Chapter Twelve: New Problems and New Directions

Discussion:

“In the second half of life, all that you have avoided for the sake of a manufactured ego ideal starts coming back as a true friend and teacher. Doers become thinkers, feelers become doers, extroverts become introverts, visionaries become practical and the practical ones long for vision.” How do you see yourself creating the space, vision, time and grace needed to travel more deeply into the call of the second half of life to live as your true self?

As you think about your day, remember times when you were thinking dualistically (either/or) and wholistically (both/and). Do you notice that wholistic thinking relieves you of the need to divide or judge? If you're comfortable, share a situation at home or at work where both/and thinking will help you deal with family, friends or work.

Experiential:

Identify someone in your life whom you would call soulful; that is, someone who reflects a sense of abundance, grace and freedom. Notice how their calm and their peace impact those around them. Talk to this person about how s/he views conflict and what s/he does to bring calm and peace to these kinds of situations. Ask how s/he opens up options and alternatives. Can you identify any of these qualities in yourself? How might you live into some of these behaviours and attitudes more fully?

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Chapter Thirteen: Falling Upward

Discussion:

Rohr says that great people come to serve, not to be served. How have you come to serve? Does the list of those you serve include people other than friends and family? How can you 'give your life away'?

Rohr writes, "Like any true mirror, the gaze of God receives us exactly as we are, without judgment or distortion, subtraction or addition. Such *perfect* receiving is what transforms us." What feelings does this statement evoke in you? Have there been times when you've felt this perfect receiving from God?

Experiential:

"It is only those who respond to *the real you, good or bad*, that help you in the long run. Much of the work of midlife is learning to tell the difference between people who are still dealing with *their issues through* you and those who are really dealing with *you are you are*."

Are you able to name one or two friends who have been a true mirror for you? If so, write a note to the friend(s) expressing your thanks and explaining why you are grateful. If your one true mirror has been the accepting gaze of God, write a prayer of thanks for that gift from God.