

# *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*<sup>1</sup>

by Richard Rohr

Here's a detailed, structured summary of **Richard Rohr's** *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. I'll aim to give you the full arc, key ideas, and the practical/spiritual implications Rohr draws out.

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## The core premise

Rohr proposes that human life naturally unfolds in **two major spiritual “halves.”**

- **First half of life:** we build a “container” for the self—identity, belonging, competence, rules, worldview, ego strength.
- **Second half of life:** we're invited to **move beyond the container**—toward surrender, mystery, compassion, non-dual awareness, and living for the whole rather than the part.

The twist in Rohr's title is that growth in the second half rarely feels like “climbing upward.” It often feels like **falling, losing, failing, or being undone**—yet this “fall” is precisely what opens us to deeper life.

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## Part I — Understanding the two halves

### 1. Why two halves?

Rohr says spiritual traditions across cultures hint that life comes in stages, not one straight line. The first half is about **forming the ego**, because without a formed self we can't transcend it. Healthy early formation is not optional; it's the runway for later transformation.

### 2. First-half tasks (the “container”)

The first half is where we:

- learn the rules and boundaries of life
- seek approval and belonging

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<sup>1</sup> Used ChatGPT to create a summary of *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr. Published 2011 and revised and updated 2023. [www.lifesjourney.us](http://www.lifesjourney.us) - November 2025.

Amazon link: [Falling Upward, Revised and Updated: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life: Rohr, Richard, Brown, Brene: 9781394185696: Amazon.com: Books](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9781394185696)

- develop skills, status, and security
- form convictions and identity markers
- build “a self” that can operate in the world

Rohr is positive about this phase. It’s **necessary and good**. Problems arise when we **mistake the container for the whole journey**.

### 3. The danger of getting stuck

Many people (and institutions) never leave first-half consciousness. That produces:

- rigid certainty
- moralism without mercy
- identity based on being “right”
- fear of difference
- spiritual life as performance or bookkeeping

Rohr frames this as living from the **ego’s need for control**, even if it’s draped in religion.

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## Part II — What moves us into the second half?

### 4. The “stumbling stone”

The passage from first half to second half usually comes through what Rohr calls a **stumbling stone**—something that **disrupts the ego’s plan**:

- failure
- loss
- suffering
- humiliation
- illness
- disappointment
- grief
- death of a dream
- deep love that rearranges priorities

You don’t “choose” this transition in a neat, self-improvement way. Life chooses you. The ego experiences it as falling; the soul experiences it as awakening.

### 5. Necessary suffering vs. neurotic suffering

Rohr distinguishes:

- **necessary suffering:** the pain that truthfully breaks us open and matures us
- **unnecessary (neurotic) suffering:** pain we create by resisting reality, clinging to control, or replaying old wounds

Second-half spirituality doesn't avoid pain; it **lets pain do its holy work**.

## 6. The role of liminality

He uses the anthropological idea of **liminality** (threshold space). It's the in-between period where the old self no longer works, but the new self isn't clear yet. Liminality feels like:

- confusion
- not knowing
- loss of status
- disorientation
- surrendering old maps

But liminal seasons are **where real transformation happens**.

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## Part III — The shape of second-half spirituality

### 7. The second half is not about “doing better”

In the second half, the spiritual focus shifts from:

- **achievement → meaning**
- **performance → presence**
- **being right → being loving**
- **comparison → compassion**
- **control → consent to reality**

This is why Rohr says “falling upward”: the doorway into wisdom is often the collapse of the identity you spent years building.

### 8. From dualistic to non-dual consciousness

A major theme is moving from **either/or thinking** to **both/and seeing**. First-half minds sort life into neat binaries:

- good/evil
- insider/outsider

- success/failure
- sacred/secular
- right/wrong

Second-half consciousness becomes more comfortable with paradox:

- life is messy
- people are mixed
- truth is often tension, not a single pole
- God is found in everything, not just “religious” spaces

This non-dual awareness is not relativism; it’s **deeper realism**.

## 9. The true self emerges

Rohr draws on contemplative Christianity:

- **false self:** ego identity formed by roles, achievements, masks, fears
- **true self:** the self grounded in God, love, and belonging before performance

Second-half living is the gradual **unmasking** of false-self strategies. You stop needing to be special, noticed, or protected in the same way.

## 10. A new relationship to God

Second-half faith isn’t about earning God or defending God. It becomes:

- relational
- experiential
- humble
- contemplative
- centered on grace

God shifts from being a “solution to life’s problems” to being **the loving Presence within life as it is**.

## Part IV — Mature spirituality in practice

### 11. Prayer becomes contemplation

Rohr says first-half prayer often focuses on:

- asking
- fixing

- bargaining
- proving worth
- getting answers

Second-half prayer leans into:

- silence
- trust
- resting in Presence
- letting go of outcomes
- being transformed rather than informed

Contemplation is not a technique to control God; it's a way to **consent to God's already-given presence**.

## 12. Morality becomes mercy

Rules matter in the first half because they shape the container. In the second half, rules are held within a bigger frame: **love and compassion**. Mature morality:

- sees context
- values people over systems
- looks for healing more than punishment
- understands that everyone is both strong and broken

Second-half ethics are less about “reward/punishment” and more about **restoring wholeness**.

## 13. The gift of aging

Rohr is frank: aging strips away illusions. If we cooperate, it brings:

- gratitude
- humor about oneself
- freedom from image management
- deeper empathy
- legacy-thinking: “how can I serve the whole?”

Eldering is a spiritual vocation, not a decline.

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## Part V — Christ as the map of the journey

### 14. Jesus models the two halves

Rohr reads Jesus' life as a template:

- **first half:** identity formation, belonging to tradition, learning scripture, gathering community
- **transition:** desert, rejection, confrontation, misunderstanding, suffering
- **second half:** radical compassion, boundary-crossing love, non-dual teaching, surrender, “losing” on the cross

The resurrection symbolizes that **letting-go is not the end**—it's the opening to a larger life.

## 15. The cross as “pattern,” not exception

Rohr emphasizes the cross as a universal pathway:

- the ego must “die” for the soul to live
- relinquishment is part of spiritual maturity
- love keeps moving toward union even through loss

This is what makes Christianity, at core, a path of transformation, not mere moral improvement.

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## Ending vision: what second-half people offer the world

Second-half people become:

- **wise elders instead of anxious achievers**
- **bridge-builders instead of boundary-police**
- **servants of the common good**
- **humble lovers of mystery**
- **people who can hold suffering without needing to fix it**

They are less driven by fear, more by compassion, and they tend to **create space for others to become whole**.

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## Rohr's big takeaways (in plain language)

1. **The first half is necessary**—you need a solid self before you can surrender it.
2. **The second half is inevitable** if you are willing to learn from life's losses.
3. **Failure and suffering are not derailments; they are the path.**
4. **Spiritual maturity is a move from control to trust.**
5. **Non-dual love is the fruit**—seeing the whole, not just the parts.
6. **The goal isn't perfection.** The goal is union—living inside love.