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New freedom found in second half of life

Dolores Leckey | Nov. 2, 2011

FALLING UPWARD: A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWO HALVES OF LIFE
By Richard Rohr
Published by Jossey-Bass, $19.95

The title of this latest book by the Franciscan writer Richard Rohr reminds me of a painting by an artist friend whose work hangs in many public buildings in the United States. It is an oil painting of an abstract angel, seemingly all wings, strong and inviting, pulling the viewer forward and upward into freedom. The legend accompanying the painting reads: ?Where are the angels? They?re standing here.? Rohr?s treatment of the second half of life is about the experience of *now* and *here*.

He posits that if the first half of life is about achievement and accomplishment, as well as learning from our mistakes and falls from grace, the passage into maturity (elderhood perhaps) allows us to shed the ego needs of the constructed false self, and embrace the uniqueness of the true self -- the soul -- with all its battle scars as well as beauty. This new personal freedom with its deepening consciousness can place us at odds with the familiar, including institutions (the church perhaps), and even family. We no longer measure ourselves by titles, or public images, roles or our place in the dominant culture.

Rohr offers Jesus as an example of the mature, free person, citing the scene when Jesus is told that his mother and family are distressed by his itinerant lifestyle and teaching. And Jesus? response is to pointedly ask, ?Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?? The author?s gloss on this passage from Mark (3:21) is that Jesus in his maturity was in touch with his soul and was not following the ?expected and mainline script for his culture or his religion.?

The movement from superficiality to living out of the essential self is the promise of the second half. It is what the author calls falling upward into the real, or reality. He writes, ?This ?something real? is what all the world religions were pointing to when they spoke of heaven, nirvana, bliss, or enlightenment. They were not wrong at all; their only mistake was that they pushed it off into the next world. *If heaven is later it is because it is first of all now*.?

How does one come to such keen awareness? By living, reflecting, struggling, holding on, letting go -- so it seems to me, one well-entrenched in the second half. Yet I also know that this adventure in freedom requires lifelong learning. How many times do we need to be reminded that the key that unlocks life?s mysteries is within? Seven times 70, surely. Rohr?s new book is an excellent reminder as he urges his readers to enjoy the new spaciousness of life in the second half. ?Now you are just *here*, and here holds more than enough. Such ?hereness? ... has its own heft, authority, and influence.?

And it may help to sense that angels are standing here.

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