

THE BIG IDEAS



The Light Bulbs

Let's stay screwed in.

Life's Two Major Tasks

First Half + Second Half = Whole.

The Way Up

And the way down.

The Hero + Heroine

And their journeys.

The Paradox of the Ego

Yes, and...

A Serene Disciple

The second half of a spiritual life.

"As Desmond Tutu once told me on a recent trip to Cape Town, 'We are only the light bulbs, Richard, and our job is just to remain screwed in!'"

~ Richard Rohr

Falling Upward

A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life

BY RICHARD ROHR · JOSSEY-BASS © 2011 · 240 PAGES

"Holding our *inner blueprint*, which is a good description for our soul, and returning it humbly to the world and to God by love and service is indeed of ultimate concern. Each thing and every person must act out its nature fully, at whatever cost. It is our life's purpose, and the deepest meaning of 'natural law.' We are here to give back fully and freely what was first given to us—but now writ personally—by us! It is probably the most courageous and free act we will ever perform—and it takes both halves of our life to do it fully. The first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it.

So get ready for a great adventure, the one you were really born for. If we never get to our little bit of heaven, our life does not make much sense, and we have created our own 'hell.' So get ready for some new freedom, some dangerous permission, some hope from nowhere, some unexpected happiness, some stumbling stones, some radical grace, and some new and pressing responsibility for yourself and for our suffering world."

~ Richard Rohr from *Falling Upward*

Alexandra got this book for me after I told her how much I loved David Brooks' [The Second Mountain](#). Apparently it is recommended alongside that book on Amazon. With 1,400+ reviews, Alexandra thought I might like it.

And, well, YES!! Not only did I *like* the book, I loved it. And, I fell in love with Richard Rohr.

Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest. In fact, he's been a Franciscan priest for FIVE DECADES. (This has particular resonance for me. As we've discussed, I was raised Catholic and went to Catholic school for twelve years. At my elementary school and primary church, our priests were Franciscan. Yet... The closest I've come to studying an integrated Catholic perspective thus far has been Anthony de Mello—a Jesuit priest. So... I found Father Richard's wisdom particularly resonant for a range of reasons.)

Now... When I read a book, I use a blank note card as a bookmark. On that note card, I jot down related books and ideas I want to make sure we cover in our Notes together. At the top of the bookmark-card for this book I wrote this description of Father Richard: "If Joseph Campbell was a Franciscan monk."

I laughed as I typed that but it's a pretty good, playful micro-bio. Throw in a little Ken Wilber and a TON of "elderly" wisdom and voila. We have one of my new favorite spiritual teachers.

My copy of the book is (laughing again as I type this) RIDICULOUSLY underlined and asterisked and marked all up. Creating a Note in which we pull out just a handful of my favorite Ideas will be even more challenging than usual. If you also resonate with the ideas, I think you'll really enjoy the book as well. (Get a copy [here](#).)

For now, let's jump straight in!

"One of the guiding principles of our Center for Action and Contemplation puts it this way: 'The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.'"

~ Richard Rohr

THE LIGHT BULBS

"I am trusting that you will see the truth of this map, yet it is the kind of soul truth that we only know 'through a glass darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12)—and through a glass brightly at the same time. Yet any glass through which we see is always made of human hands, like mine. All spiritual language is by necessity metaphor and symbol. The Light comes from elsewhere, yet it is necessarily reflected through those of us still walking on the journey ourselves. As Desmond Tutu once told me on a recent trip to Cape Town, 'We are only the light bulbs, Richard, and our job is just to remain screwed in!'"

Welcome to page vii from "The Invitation to a Further Journey."

I just LOVE that metaphor from Desmond Tutu.

-> "We are only the light bulbs... and our job is just to remain screwed in!"

We're kicking off our Mastery Series and Optimize Coach-II programs in a week. I am preparing for the introduction session now. And... That line pretty much captures the essence of all of our work together: Helping us screw in our light bulbs so we can let the Divine Light shine! :)

That wise quip also answers Joseph Campbell's question (from [The Power of Myth](#)) quite well. He asked: "What am I? Am I the bulb that carries the light, or am I the light of which the bulb is a vehicle?"

In other fun news: After reading that line, I'm having fun playing around with my Energy Identity. "Athlete" has served me well. As has "Radiant Exemplar."

But... As I was starting my hike the other day and going through my ritualized warm up, I realized with deeper clarity what the REAL reason for Optimizing my Energy is and also realized that perhaps "Screwed-in Light Bulb" is the best possible Energy Identity. :)

So...

Here's to keeping ourselves screwed in.

Today!

P.S. Right after that passage above, Richard tells us: "I believe that God gives us our soul, our deepest identity, our True Self, our unique blueprint, at our own 'immaculate conception.' Our unique little bit of heaven is installed by the Manufacturer within the product, at the beginning! We are given a span of years to discover it, to choose it, and to live our destiny to the full. If we do not, our True Self will never be offered again, in our own unique form—which is perhaps why almost all religious traditions present the matter with utterly charged words like 'heaven' and 'hell.' Our soul's discovery is utterly crucial, momentous, and of pressing importance for each of us and for the world. We do not 'make' or 'create' our souls; we just 'grow' them up. We are the clumsy stewards of our own souls. We are charged to awaken, and much of the work of spirituality is learning how to stay out of the way of this rather natural growing and awakening. We need to unlearn a lot, it seems, to get back to that foundational life which is 'hidden in God' (Colossians 3:3). Yes, transformation is often more about unlearning than learning, which is why the religious traditions call it 'conversion' or 'repentance.'"

btw... As I typed that out I realized I could type out (and comment on!) the whole book and still BARELY scratch the surface of its wisdom.

"No wise person ever wanted to be younger."

~ Native American aphorism

THE TWO MAJOR TASKS OF LIFE

"There is much evidence on several levels that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task is to build a strong 'container' or identity; the second is to find the contents that the container was meant to hold. The first task we take for granted as the very purpose of life, which

"What is a normal goal to a young person becomes a neurotic hindrance in old age."

~ Carl Jung

"Your concern is not so much to have what you love anymore, but to love what you have-right now. This is a monumental change from the first half of life, so much so that it is almost the litmus test of whether you are in the second half of life at all."

~ Richard Rohr

"Thomas Merton, the American monk, pointed out that 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."

~ Richard Rohr

does not mean we do it well. The second task, I am told, is more encountered than sought; few arrive at it with much preplanning, purpose, or passion. So you might wonder if there is much point in providing a guide to the territory ahead of time. Yet that is exactly why we must. It is vitally important to know what is coming and being offered to us all."

That's from the Introduction. (We're now on page xi. :)

As I mentioned in our little intro, I got this book after reading David Brooks' *The Second Mountain*. After reading Father Richard's take on the subject, you can see just how deeply David was inspired by and influenced by Richard's profound spiritual wisdom.

What Richard calls "the two tasks of life" or "the two halves of life," David calls "the two mountains of life."

Same essential idea.

The first task/first half/first mountain of life is all about "surviving successfully."

But...

Richard (and David) tell us that there's a task both "within the task" and BEYOND the task. We need to move beyond creating a life the world expects from us and answer the call of our soul.

To repeat: "There is much evidence on several levels that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task is to build a strong 'container' or identity; the second is to find the contents that the container was meant to hold."

Helping us navigate the path from one mountain to the next and stepping up to our ultimate task is what this book is all about. In the process, we move from what Richard calls the "survival dance" to the "sacred dance."

Let's explore some ideas on how we go about doing that...

THE WAY UP AND THE WAY DOWN

"The soul has many secrets. They are only revealed to those who want them, and are never completely forced upon us. One of the best-kept secrets, and yet one hidden in plain sight, is that *the way up is the way down*. Or, if you prefer, *the way down is the way up*. This pattern is obvious in all of nature, from the very change of the seasons and substances on this earth, to the six hundred million tons of hydrogen the sun burns every day to light and warm our earth, and even to the metabolic laws of dieting or fasting. The down-up pattern is constant, too, in mythology, in stories like that of Persephone, who must descend into the underworld and marry Hades for spring to be reborn.

In legends and literature, sacrifice of something to achieve something else is almost the only pattern. Dr. Faust has to sell his soul to the devil to achieve power and knowledge; Sleeping Beauty must sleep for a hundred years before she can receive the prince's kiss. In Scripture, we see that the wrestling and wounding of Jacob are necessary for Jacob to become Israel (Genesis 32:26-32), and the death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary to create Christianity. The loss and renewal pattern is so constant and ubiquitous that it should hardly be called a secret at all."

We're still in the Introduction. Page xvi. (Although we *will* move on, we could literally spend our whole time in this Note unpacking a few gems from the Intro! That's how wise this book is.)

So...

Want to move "UP" to the higher path of the soul? Get ready to go "DOWN."

Enter: The title of the book and Richard's incessant theme that, for whatever Mysterious reason, the way UP is DOWN. We need to die to our small self to be born into the best version of ourselves. We need to embrace the "necessary suffering" of our lives as we "fall" "upward."

"Like skaters, we move forward by actually moving from side to side."

~ Richard Rohr

"If you have forgiven yourself for being imperfect and falling, you can now do it for just about everybody else. If you have not done it for yourself, I am afraid you will likely pass on your sadness, absurdity, judgment, and futility to others."

~ Richard Rohr

"Carl Jung said that so much unnecessary suffering comes into the world because people will not accept the 'legitimate suffering' that comes from being human."

~ Richard Rohr

As Richard says: "Normally a job, fortune, or reputation has to be lost, a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured. The pattern in fact is so clear that one has to work rather hard, or be intellectually lazy, to miss the continual lesson."

And... "It is not that suffering or failure might happen, or that it will only happen if you are bad (which is what religious people often think), or that it will happen to the unfortunate, or to a few in other places, or that you can somehow by cleverness or righteousness avoid it. No, it will happen, and to you! Losing, failing, falling, sin, and the suffering that comes from those experiences—all of this is a necessary and even good part of the human journey."

So... Yah...

We've got some good news and some bad news.

Bad news: You WILL face hardships. Pain. Suffering.

Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Good news: It's not because something's wrong with you per se. It's because you're HUMAN.

And... If we want to become the most Divinely inspired (screwed-in light bulb!) versions of ourselves, we need to quit ignoring the pain and/or trying to numb it via compulsive distraction and/or addictive behavior.

We need to embrace the reality of what Richard calls "necessary suffering" and allow it to awaken our humble commitment to something bigger than ourselves as we listen to our souls.

P.S. "If there is such a thing as human perfection, it seems to emerge precisely from how we handle the imperfection that is everywhere, especially our own. What a clever place for God to hide holiness, so that only the humble and earnest will find it! A 'perfect' person ends up being one who can consciously forgive and include imperfection rather than one who thinks he or she is totally above and beyond imperfection. It becomes sort of obvious once you say it out loud. In fact, I would say that the demand for the perfect is the greatest enemy of the good."

THE HERO AND HEROINE'S JOURNEY

"If you look at the world's mythologies in any of the modern collections, you will invariably see what Joseph Campbell calls the 'monomyth of the hero' repeated in various forms for both men and women, but with different symbols. The stages of the hero's journey are a skeleton of what this book wants to say! In some ways, we are merely going to unpack this classic journey and draw out many of the implications that are even clearer today, both psychologically and spiritually. We are the beneficiaries of spiritual informational globalization, like no one has ever been before."

I actually wrote "If Joseph Campbell was a Franciscan monk" on that note card BEFORE I got to Chapter 2 called "The Hero and Heroine's Journey." But this chapter sealed the deal.

Here we have a deeply committed Franciscan monk leaning on the great mythological stories of civilization to tell us that our spiritual lives are *just like* those hero myths. (Which, of course, is one of the reasons why I love him so much.)

Father Richard kicks off this chapter with this quote from Campbell's [*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*](#): "We have only to follow the thread of the hero path. Where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outwards, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world."

Then Richard tells us that "The pattern of the heroic journey is rather consistent" and walks us through his take on those stages of initiation, including:

"The ancients rightly called this internal longing for wholeness 'fate' or 'destiny,' the 'inner voice' or the 'call of the gods.' It has an inevitability, authority, and finality to it, and was at the heart of almost all mythology. Almost all heroes heard an inner voice that spoke to them. In fact, their heroism was in their ability to hear that voice and to risk following it—wherever!"

~ Richard Rohr

“1. They live in a world that they presently take as given and sufficient; they are often a prince or princess, and, if not, sometimes of divine origin, which of course they always know nothing about! (This amnesia is a giveaway for the core religious problem, as discovering our divine DNA is always the task.)

2. They have the call or the courage to leave home for an adventure of some type—not really to solve any problem, but just to go out and beyond their present comfort zone. ...

3. On this journey or adventure, they in fact find their real problem! ... There is always a wounding; and the great epiphany is that the wound becomes the secret key, even ‘sacred,’ a wound that changes them dramatically, which, by the way, is the precise meaning of the wounds of Jesus! ...

4. The first task, which the hero or heroine thinks is the only task, is only the vehicle and warm-up act to get him or her to the real task. ...

5. The hero or heroine then returns to where he or she started, and ‘knows the place for the first time,’ as T.S. Eliot puts it; but now with a gift or ‘boon’ for his people or her village. As the last step of Alcoholics Anonymous says, a person must pass the lessons learned on to others—or there has been no real gift at all. The hero’s journey is always an experience of an excess of life, a surplus of energy with plenty left over for others.”

One more gem: “True heroism serves the common good, or it is not really heroism at all.”

There ya go. A Franciscan monk’s take on the Hero’s SPIRITUAL Journey up the Second Mountain to complete the most important tasks of life.

All of which makes me that much more committed to our little progression of Optimizing to become the best version of ourselves so we can give our gifts to the world:

Optimize = Optimus = Best = Eudaimon = Hero.

Which leads us to ...

THE PARADOX OF THE EGO

“You need a very strong container to hold the contents and contradictions that arrive later in life. You ironically need a very strong ego structure to let go of your ego. You need to struggle with the rules more than a bit before you throw them out. You only internalize values by butting up against external values for a while. All of this builds the strong self that can *positively* obey Jesus—and ‘die to itself.’ In fact, far too many (especially women and disadvantaged people) have lived very warped and defeated lives because they tried to give up a self that was not there yet.

This is an important paradox for most of us.”

Have you ever heard a Franciscan monk reference Ken Wilber and Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung? It’s a beautiful thing. :)

Alas, we arrive at what we’ll call “The Paradox of the Ego.” If we want to “let go” of our ego, we must first have it firmly in our grasp. We talk about this in our Notes on Joseph Campbell’s [Pathways to Bliss](#) and our [Notes](#) on Ken Wilber.

Campbell tells us: “Of course, to reach the transpersonal, you have to go through the personal: you have to have both qualities there.”

Wilber echoes that wisdom: “But ‘egoless’ does not mean ‘less than personal’; it means ‘more than personal.’ Not personal minus, but personal plus—all the normal qualities, plus some transpersonal ones. ... There is certainly a type of truth to the notion of transcending ego: it doesn’t mean destroy the ego, it means plug it into something bigger... Put bluntly, the ego is not an obstruction to Spirit, but a radiant manifestation of Spirit.”

"Learn and obey the rules very well, so you will know how to break them properly."

~ The Dalai Lama

"So our question now becomes, 'How can I honor the legitimate needs of the first half of life, while creating space, vision, time, and grace for the second?' The holding of this tension is the very shape of wisdom. ... The human art form is in uniting fruitful activity with a contemplative stance—not one or the other, but always both at the same time."

~ Richard Rohr

Building this "ego container" is the primary task of the first half of life. Then we need to empty it in the second half of life. And refill it with God.

A SERENE DISCIPLE: THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

"In the second half of the spiritual life, you are not making choices as much as you are being guided, taught and led—which leads to 'choiceless choices.' These are the things you cannot **not** do because of what you have become, things you do not need to do because they are just not yours to do, and things you absolutely must do because they are your destiny and your deepest desire. Your driving motives are no longer money, success, or the approval of others. You have found your sacred dance.

Now your only specialness is being absolutely ordinary and even 'choiceless,' beyond the strong opinions, needs, preferences, and demands of the first half of life. You do not need your 'visions' anymore; you are happily participating in God's vision for you.

With that, the wonderful dreaming and the dreamer that we were in our early years have morphed into Someone Else's dream for us. We move from the driver's seat to being a happy passenger, one who is still allowed to make helpful suggestions to the Driver. We are henceforth 'a serene disciple,' living in our own unique soul as never before, yet paradoxically living within the mind and heart of God, and taking our place in the great and general dance.

Amen, Alleluia!"

Those are the final words of the book in which Richard is reflecting on Thomas Merton's poem called "When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple."

Our Serene Disciple is no longer driven by money and success and the approval of others. That's the first half of life "survival dance." We are now answering the call of our souls and doing what we're here to do as part of the bigger "sacred dance" of life.

We are no longer gripping the steering wheel quite so hard. In fact, we've moved to the passenger seat and allowed the Driver (with a capital "D"!) to get us where we need to go. We are "Serene Disciples" to a power much bigger than us.

What more can we say than, "Amen, Alleluia!"

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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you'll probably like...

[The Second Mountain](#)

[The Road to Character](#)

[The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#)

[A Joseph Campbell Companion](#)

[Pathways to Bliss](#)

[Man's Search for Meaning](#)

[Awareness](#)