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## Going on 84 and Going Strong . . . by Dr. Reuben Makayiko Chirambo

My hearing (in hymn or sermon or Scripture) that God's love for us is totally unconditional probably isn't more than intellectually understood and accepted. Unless I think of my Mother. Of how she has lived and what she still does. And when the richness of remembering floods over me, I have a sense of the veil being made "thin," of the reality of an unconditional love.

Last January I was again in my village in Malawi, up in the north of the country visiting my mother from my teaching job at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. I have visited her almost every year during this time, December/January being the months when we get the first rains in our area, with which we plant our season's crops, mostly maize, our staple. Though I have not personally worked in the gardens for some years now, this time I thought I could help my mother with the planting. When I did, it was an experience that made me ashamed of myself but also proud of my mother.

Maybe my pride first. It was on a Saturday in the second week of January when I woke up around 8:30 and as I checked outside through the window, still standing behind the curtains, I saw my mother busy planting her pumpkin and bean seeds in the small gardens around our house. The maize, beans, and pumpkins that we grow there are what we eat green (fresh) while that from the main garden is what we harvest and put in storage. I knew she must have been working there from as early as before 6:00. I felt proud as I recalled that she has done this for as long as I have been around. I turned 47 last year while she turned 83. And as far as I can remember she has always worked the gardens and worked hard. And today she seemed determined to finish the planting, for we had had rains for almost a week and the maize was already growing and she wanted the pumpkins and beans to catch up with the maize before the rains took a break in what had become an unpredictable weather pattern.

And now my shame. The day before, I'd joined my mother to plant the seeds. Not only did she out-pace me but also I could not work as long. She dug small holes close to the

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An ecumenical sampler of events and resources for spiritual growth, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey, published by the Spiritual Growth Community of Westminster Presbyterian Church



**WESTMINSTER**  
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**"What we take in by contemplation,  
that we pour out in love.  
What we plant in the soil of contemplation,  
that we shall reap in the harvest of action."**

**Meister Eckhart**

Look for *Thin Places* at: [www.thinplaces.us](http://www.thinplaces.us) or [www.ewestminster.org/thin\\_places](http://www.ewestminster.org/thin_places)

maize stations with her bare feet and threw in the seeds which she covered with a thin layer of soil using the same feet and moved on quite quickly while I, wearing slip-ons and using a stick to dig holes, had to bend to throw in the seeds and my back was soon aching so that I could not go on. After several ridges I put back the remaining seeds into the bowl and returned into the house to wait for breakfast while my mother worked on. Hence this morning I decided to stay in bed. So when I watched my 83-year-old mother work in the garden I could not but feel ashamed of myself.

But then when I look back at the life of my mother, my shame aside, I always feel proud of her. Of her six children, four girls and two boys, I am probably the one who has grown up around her the most. I was three in 1966 when she came back from Zambia, where my father worked in the mines, to live at home. I lived with her as my siblings including my younger brother lived elsewhere. I only truly went away from her when I started college at twenty. In those years of living with her, I was amazed at her strength and hard work which now I realize has always been about making sure we have enough of what we need, especially food. She has always made sure we don't have to buy or beg for food when we can grow it.

As I stood behind the curtains, I recalled growing up with her in our one-bedroomed grass-thatched house and the many times after daybreak I followed her to the main garden where she would have gone before dawn to work. I would carry my small hoe and join her. But it wouldn't be long before I tired and she would notice. She would tell me to sit in the shade as she hoed on. On school days, she would rise quite early to make breakfast for me (boiled sweet potatoes and tea) which she would place beside the fireplace to keep warm, and there would be a pot of warm water on the fire itself for me to wash before going to school. By the time I woke up she would long be gone to the garden. And thanks to her, there was no year when we did not have enough food to last us the year or when I went to school without breakfast.

In the summer of 2002, now grown up and visiting her from my graduate studies at the University of Minnesota in the U.S., I noted that it had been a difficult year for many families around because there had been drought. I also noted an increased number of visitors to our family, most of whom were claiming to be relations, though I never really knew them. They would stay for a day or two and leave with at least some maize. They came

to my mother because we had relatively a good harvest despite the drought, again thanks to my mother's hard work. As I left to return to the U.S., I advised my mother in what I intended to be warning not to give away the maize when we still had a long year to go before the first rains would come again. She looked at me and with a smile said, "A piece of food is never small, but a piece of cloth is because you cannot break it."

I got to Minnesota fearing that the family would run out of food anytime before the next harvest. It did not happen. As I recollected her words, I remembered the disciples of Jesus who came to him one late afternoon, asking him to send away hungry people as there was no food around. They showed him five loaves of bread and two fish, surely not enough for the hungry multitude. Jesus broke the bread and fish into pieces and gave them back to the disciples to feed the people. With this story I thought of my mother and realized my own little faith and even lack of generosity. I realized it is not about how much plenty we have in order to share but how much generosity we have in our hearts and faith to break the little into pieces to help those around us. A lesson my mother taught me with a practical example.

Today, as I look back to all these experiences with my mother, and as I see her growing old yet still as strong, I feel as if I am still just a boy (hiding behind the curtain) envying her strength. And in my heart I am truly thankful to God for her, her relatively good health, her great strength and above all her unconditional love for her family and others around.

As I look forward to her 84th birthday, and to my 48th and into the second half of my life, I can only hope that her steadfast caring will continue to live through me and through my two daughters to plant new seeds which will thrive in and for others. Then I will truly have learnt my lesson from her and can be proud of myself.

*After completing college, Dr. Chirambo taught in high schools and then at the University of Malawi before coming to complete his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. While in the Twin Cities, Reuben was a member and Deacon at Andrew-Riverside Presbyterian Church near the university's campus and an early Thin Places reader. He now teaches at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, returning to the family home in Malawi when school is not in session. Reuben may be reached at rmchirambo@yahoo.com.*

**Silence, Solitude, Service:****Awakening to the Contemplative Dimension of Life**

For the last twenty-seven years Contemplative Outreach has been offering both practical help and gentle encouragement, introducing many of us to Centering Prayer, putting us in touch with others, and then helping contemplative practices encourage contemplative living. (Possible bias notification: the seed for *Thin Places* was probably planted during a reading of Thomas Keating's *Open Mind, Open Heart*.)

The Contemplative Outreach website has recently been redesigned and is easy to use and helpfully full, with segments on:

- Centering Prayer
- *Lectio Divina*
- Welcoming Prayer  
(offering a new Welcoming Prayer Online Course and a Welcoming Prayer Brochure)
- Retreat Listings
- Prayer Groups, and a
- Calendar of Events

You may also sign up for the monthly e-news bulletin. And there is a new, brief video message from Fr. Keating, *The Habit of Heartfulness*, on the Home Page each week, “offered for pondering in your heart and manifesting in your life.”

In the segment being offered as this is written, Fr. Keating explains how “the dark nights” that many people encounter on their spiritual journey are actually “a passive infusion of divine love,” helping us to do what we may not be able to do on our own, helping us to let go of false-self barriers to spiritual growth.

To explore the website: [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org).

**Re-Awakening  
to the Contemplative Dimension of Life**

Contemplative Outreach's Annual Conference is open to those who have just discovered it and to those who have sought to live contemplatively for some time.

The conference will offer a new video by Thomas Keating; . . . an opening address, “**Contemplative Service in Action**”; . . . presentations and workshops led by notable presenters; . . . times for networking and for

meeting with friends on the contemplative journey; . . . and twice daily Centering Prayer.

Registration options include the full conference or just Saturday's “Day of Enrichment”:

**Thursday, September 29, at 2:00 p.m. to  
Sunday, October 2, after breakfast**

Marriott San Francisco Airport Waterfront Hotel  
For information or registration:  
973-838-3384 or [Olsiana@coutreach.org](mailto:Olsiana@coutreach.org) or  
[www.contemplativeoutreach.org/2011conference](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/2011conference).

The website of Minnesota Contemplative Outreach, [www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org), [or the Contemplative Outreach branch in your area] is also a rich resource, with individual segments on:

- Centering Prayer
- Enrichment Opportunities
- Groups
- Newsletter
- Resources

Among “Enrichment Opportunities,” perhaps note especially the upcoming: **Formation Training for  
Contemplative Outreach Service.**

This will be an occasion for participants to learn how to teach Centering Prayer to folks who are hungering for a deeper relationship with God.

It includes daily Centering Prayer, conferences, and the opportunity to practice teaching the other participants in a safe and loving small group format:

**Sun., Aug. 7, at 6:30 p.m.-Thurs., Aug. 11, 4:00 p.m.**  
St. Scholastic Monastery, 1001 Kenwood Ave., Duluth  
For information or registration: [maschifsky@lakenet.com](mailto:maschifsky@lakenet.com)  
or 218.525.9363.

**“If we stop and let life in our particular community of faith give us new eyes to see, we might catch a glimpse of the Beyond moving close by.**

**Our very people—with whom we worship and work, argue and disagree, pray and hope, love and live—can become a thin place, where God is known first hand.**

**And in our thin-place families called congregations, the veil of mystery surrounding the divine can, indeed, become exceedingly sheer. God is near.”**

**Tim Hart-Andersen**

**“The creation of thin places . . .  
should be the purpose  
of much which we do in the Church.”**

**Marcus Borg**

### “Summer on the Mount”

These summer Wednesday evening worship experiences—focusing on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—are for those who may be up at the lake on the weekends and for all who appreciate the innovative and creative:

**Summer Wednesdays, June 1-July 27, 6:15-7:00 p.m.**

Westminster Presbyterian Church

1200 Marquette Avenue, Minneapolis

Information: 612.322.3421 or [kfisher@wpc-mpls.org](mailto:kfisher@wpc-mpls.org)

*Free family BBQ in the courtyard  
following the June 1 service.*

### Centering Prayer

“God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” [Alan of Lille, 11th century].

Come join our circle of Prayer:

**Wednesdays, 7:10-8:00 p.m.**

Franciscan Poor Clares

8650 Russell Avenue South, Bloomington

For information: [www.poorclaresminneapolis.org](http://www.poorclaresminneapolis.org) or

952.881.4766.

### The Hermitage at Clearwater

Now in its fifth year, the Clearwater Hermitage is making real the hope with which it was created: providing a very special sacred place for relaxation and renewal, for reflection and writing, for solitude and prayer.

Deep in the woods, the Hermitage has a large picture window and a screened porch for nature watching. Inside you will find simple comforts, an extra-long bed, a comfortable chair, and a broad writing table. For your convenience there is electricity for lighting, a coffee maker, a microwave, and a small refrigerator. A propane fireplace provides warmth in cooler weather.

The Hermitage is available to clergy and religious—of every denomination and faith tradition—and to Christian

from *The Road to Joy*, by Thomas Merton

**“I wish you all peace and joy in the Lord and an increase in faith. [And] once again let me say how much I appreciate the loyalty of old friends, and the interest of new ones. I shall continue to feel bound to each of you in the silence of prayer.**

**Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, of deepening, and of an even greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. . . . I pray we may all do this generously. God bless you.”**

Educators, Youth Directors and other church professionals at **NO COST** . . . and is open to all others for only a modest fee.

This is a special place of peace, where one may heal the body and nourish the soul and restore the spirit:

**Available 7 days a week, year around**

Clearwater Forest Retreat Center, Deerwood, MN

To reserve the Hermitage for yourself or to get a brochure to share with your pastor: 218.678.2325 or

[office@clearwaterforest.org](mailto:office@clearwaterforest.org) or [www.clearwaterforest.org](http://www.clearwaterforest.org).

### Oasis of Wisdom,

**An Institute for Contemplative Studies, Practice and**

**Living** offering daily wisdom from the early Christian desert mothers and fathers is up-dated often. Today:

- Daily Wisdom (“Jesus Life of Prayer”)
- Prayer (“Breathe Prayer, an Ancient Practice”)
- David's Reflection's
- Emily's Musings
- Wooddove Community
- The Julian (of Norwich) Group

For these and more, click on: [www.oasisofwisdom.net](http://www.oasisofwisdom.net).

### Our Monthly Taizé Candlelight Services

. . . are simple, ecumenical, quiet and contemplative. They can reduce stress, deepen faith at an emotional level, and are open to those who feel drawn to worship but may have been wary of organized religion:

**3rd Sunday each month (but Aug.), 7:00-8:00 p.m.**

St Matthew's Episcopal, 136 Carter Avenue, St. Paul

For info: 651.645.3058 or [rector@stmattewsmn.org](mailto:rector@stmattewsmn.org).

from *Bread for the Journey*, by Henri Nouwen

**“Some people say, 'I am just an ordinary person, not a mystic.' But all of us can receive the grace of seeing God in the fullness of time. This mystical experience is not reserved for a few exceptional people. God wants to offer this gift in one way or another to all God's children.**

**But we must desire it. We must be attentive and interiorly alert.**

**For some people the experience of the fullness of time does come in a spectacular way, as it did to St. Paul when he fell to the ground on his way to Damascus (*Acts 9:3-4*). But for many of us it comes like a murmuring sound or a gentle breeze touching our backs (*1 Kings 11-13*). God loves us all and wants us all to know this in a most personal way.”**

**With Roots in Eternity:****Merton, the Desert and the City**

Marking the 70th anniversary of Thomas Merton's entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani, this year's gathering of the International Thomas Merton Society will focus on Merton's "exploration of spirituality and monasticism and its relevance for the modern world."

Featured speakers and workshops include Martin Marty, Esther de Wall, the "Dorothy Day Roundtable," "Merton and Poetic Imagination," and much more:

**Thursday, June 9-Sunday, June 12**

Loyola University, Lake Shore Campus, Chicago, IL  
For information/registration: [www.merton.org/Chicago](http://www.merton.org/Chicago) or 502.272.8177 or [pmpearson@bellarmine.edu](mailto:pmpearson@bellarmine.edu).

**Kenosis: The Prayer of Self-Emptying**

This Contemplative Silent Retreat represents our central ministry in spiritual formation and is particularly geared for House of Prayer alums or for anyone who has already been grounded in Christian contemplative practices.

The 8-day retreat is based on Jesus' own pattern of spiritual formation. As Paul stated: "Have the same consciousness in you that was in Christ Jesus who 'emptied (kenosis) himself.'" (*Philippians 2:7*) Primary and foundational to all Christian spiritual practices are the prayer forms that lead to self-emptying; the goal being the fullness of God in every human.

The retreat includes emersion into silent work, teachings that support the practice, contemplative disciplines, and group spiritual direction:

**Sat., June 18, at dinner-Sunday, June 26, after lunch**

Additional Opportunities the House of Prayer:

~**A School of Contemplative Wisdom I, July 17-23**

~**A School of Contemplative Wisdom II, with Cynthia Bourgeault, August 7-13 and**

~**Benedictine Experience, September 20-25**

The Episcopal House of Prayer, Collegeville, MN

For information or registration: [wbauman@csbsju.edu](mailto:wbauman@csbsju.edu) or 320.363.3293 or [www.houseofprayer.org](http://www.houseofprayer.org).

**Men's Rites of Passage**

First offered many years ago—still led by **Richard Rohr**—this is a five-day, four-night, deeply prayerful and soul-

ful experience that builds on the classic patterns of male initiation through simple moving rituals and teachings.

Each day includes group prayer, major teachings on central masculine spirituality themes by Fr. Richard, and sharing in the context of a "home group."

As many who have made this retreat before have said, "these five days offer insight into masculine spirituality. . . a time to savor the healing and awesome power of nature. . . an opportunity to examine life's priorities and to ask questions about the 'next step,' . . . and an invitation to listen to the 'quiet voice of God':"

**Wednesday, June 24-Sunday, June 28**

**(other dates and locations are also available)**

Offered by the Center for Action and Contemplation, at Audubon Center of the North Woods, Sandstone, MN  
For information / registration: [kpanderson@sherbtel.net](mailto:kpanderson@sherbtel.net) or 763.631.9208 or [www.malespirituality.org](http://www.malespirituality.org).

**The Power of Pause: A Retreat for those Who Know They Should Slow Down but Don't Know How**

Have you ever felt over-whelmed, only to add one more thing to your to-do list? Have you ever wished for an extra day in your week or an extra hour in your day? This retreat is about letting our souls and our prayers catch up with God's daily call to live life abundantly.

The author of *The Power of Pause: Becoming More by Doing Less* will offer us the wisdom of slowing down to regain personal and spiritual balance:

**Friday, June 24, 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.**

Sponsored by the Loyola Spirituality Center at Church of St. Patrick, 6820 St. Patrick Lane, Edina  
For information or registration: 351.641.0008 or [www.loyolaspirtualitycenter.org](http://www.loyolaspirtualitycenter.org).

**Lectio Pilgrimage to Saint John's Abbey**

Your retreat begins at St. Paul's Monastery with Taizé Evening Prayer and an introduction to key texts that have been brilliantly illuminated in the St. John's Bible.

On Saturday you will travel to Saint John's Abbey and continue your meditation on the texts with the original illuminations before you.

You'll spend the night at the Abbey Guesthouse and join the monks for Morning Prayer and breakfast before returning to St. Paul for Eucharist, brunch and a concluding ritual:

**Friday, July 15 at 7:00 p.m.-Sun., July 17 by 2:00 p.m.**

The Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery  
2675 Benet Road, St. Paul

For information or registration: [www.stpaulsmonastery.org](http://www.stpaulsmonastery.org)  
[benedictinecenter@st.paulsmonastery.org](mailto:benedictinecenter@st.paulsmonastery.org) 651.777.7251.

**Do you know of anyone who might like to receive *Thin Places?*** (It's sent free to all who request it.)

**Or do you know of an up-coming Opportunity that might be of interest to others?**

If 'yes' to either, please contact Kathy Fisher at:  
[kfisher@wpc-mpls.org](mailto:kfisher@wpc-mpls.org) or 612.332.3421.

**Krista Tippett on****"Spiritual Genius: Lessons for Living"**

Come to hear Krista Tippett draw upon her many years as host of NPR's "On Being" [formerly "Speaking of Faith"] as she explores "Spiritual Genius: Lessons for Living" at the next **Westminster Town Hall Forum**.

Live music begins at 6:30 as we gather—reception, refreshments and book-signing afterwards:

**Friday, June 25, 6:30-8:45 p.m.**

Westminster Presbyterian Church, in the Sanctuary

1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis

Information: 612.322.3421 or smckenna@wpc-mpls.org.

**Ritual Retreat for Young Women:****Un/Masking for Self-Making**

Our identities as young women are constantly moving and shifting based on our friendships, lived experiences and ways of seeing the world.

In this four day, three night retreat **for young women grades 9-12**, we will search the deepest part of ourselves, our inner being. We will investigate how we mask ourselves from the world and from others, and how by transforming our inner self we can work to live without masks, live our best selves.

Through creative writing, art-making, ritual, dance, yoga, spiritual self-reflection and conversation, we will imagine and practice transformational self-making:

**Sunday, July 17, at 3:00 p.m.-Weds, July 20, 3:00 p.m.**

Additional Opportunities at Wisdom Ways:

~**The Heroic Journey, June 8**

~**Peace Camp: Imagining Our Dreams, July 11-14**

Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality

Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul

For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities: wisdomways@csjstpaul.org or

651.696.2788 or www.wisdomwayscenter.org.

**Healing the Deepest Hurts with Contemplation**

Carl Jung found that even the deepest hurts can be healed through the images in dreams or when awake and contemplating. Therapists have recently discovered new ways of applying the imagination to heal severe trauma.

As we walk contemplatively with Jesus, sharing the Scriptures on our road to Emmaus, our hearts too will have the opportunity to burn within us, so that we may wisely and compassionately accompany ourselves and others who may have felt overwhelmed by trauma:

**Friday, July 29, 7:00 p.m.-Sun., July 31, at 12:45 p.m.**

Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN

For information or registration: 763.682.1394 or www.kingshouse.com or JPilarski@kingshouse.com.

~And something brand new~

**Personal Spiritual Deepening Program:****Leadership Training Conference**

After 15 years of offering the "Personal Spiritual Deepening Program" as a year-long extension program, we believe the Spirit is calling for the **world-wide community of Shalem graduates** to offer this program in a variety of new formats and settings.

We invite any Shalem graduate, who has completed one of Shalem's long-term programs, to consider applying to this leadership program, which includes: prayerful discernment of a call to offer this program in your local setting within the next year; commitment to shared leadership in partnership with Shalem; attendance at the leadership conference with a co-leader.

Shalem graduates are invited to give prayerful discernment to exploring this new opening:

**Monday, September 12-Sunday, September 18**

The Bellfry, Lexington, VA

Information on this & other opportunities:

301.897.7334 or chris@shalem.org or www.shalem.org.

**Honoring Earth's Body: Ancient Wisdom and the New Consciousness**

We live in the midst of a new consciousness, a growing awareness of the inter-relatedness of all things. Holiness is to be found in wholeness, not in separation. Spirit is to be found in matter and in honoring earth's body.

This retreat-set in the spiritually rich and spiritually palpable High Desert of northern New Mexico-will use as its basic text the "Song of Mary" and parallel texts in Jewish and Muslim traditions.

It will be led by **John Philip Newell and Ali Newell** in collaboration with Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev and Rahman Lutz of the nearby Sufi Muslim community.

Each day will begin with prayer at the rising of the sun in Ghost Ranch's Agape Center courtyard, will offer teaching and sharing in the morning and evening, and silence in the afternoon:

**There are three possibilities: Monday-Sunday, July 11-17, or July 18-24, or July 25-31**

Additional Opportunities at Ghost Ranch:

~**Family Week: Faithful Practices to Energize Your Family's Faith, June 27-July 3**

~**Ancient Voices, Artful Practices, July 18-24**

~**Journey toward an Undivided Life: a Circle of Trust Retreat (based on the work of Parker Palmer), September 12-18**

Casa del Sol, Ghost Ranch Retreat Center, Abiquiu, NM

For information or registration: www.ghostranch.org

or 505.685.4333 or registrar@ghostranch.org.

***Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, by Richard Rohr***

This book has much light to cast, and it also reassures.

Writers and teachers since the earliest of times—and ourselves in our own experience—have seen our lives as a journey. Perhaps some of us, as we may have become more intentional about our spiritual journeys, may have given too much attention and regret to the “false self” elements of our lives. We may not have realized that they are not only natural but necessary stages and that they are only limiting when we do not seek to grow beyond them.

As Fr. Richard writes in his introductory “Invitation to a Further Journey”:

“After forty years as a Franciscan teacher . . . I find that many people and institutions remain stymied in the preoccupations of the first half of life. By that I mean that most people’s concerns remain those of establishing their personal (or superior) identity, creating various boundary markers for themselves, seeking security, and perhaps linking to what seem like significant people or projects.

These tasks are good to some degree and even necessary. We are all trying to find what the Greek philosopher Archimedes called a ‘lever and a place to stand’ so that we can move the world just a little bit. And the world would be much worse off if we did not do this first and important task.

But this first-half-of life task is no more than finding the starting gate. It is merely the warm-up act, not the full journey. The raft but not the shore. . . . This 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. . . .** 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.”

Perhaps Fr. Richard’s most telling assertion—one that seems extraordinarily hard to accept and to understand until it is experienced—is that for almost everyone it has been, or will be, a significant failure, a time of substantial suffering that will make the beginning of the transfer from the first- to the second-half of life journey possible:

“Some kind of falling, what I will soon call ‘necessary suffering,’ is programmed into the journey. . . . It is not that suffering or failure might happen. . . . 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.

As my favorite mystic, Lady Julian of Norwich, put it in her Middle English, ‘**Sin is behovely!**’”

And a second telling assertion is that falling can also make possible the essential characteristic of the second half of life, which is surrender, which is a deep acceptance of the fact that we are not in control, that we are not in charge, that becoming open to the further journey “**is not by our own willpower or moral perfection.**” The journey is not something we take but much more something that happens to us:

“And you will never imagine this to be true until you have gone through the ‘down’ yourself and come out on the other side in larger form. . . . Falling upward is a ‘secret’ of the soul, known not by thinking about it or proving it but only by risking it. And by allowing yourself to be lead. Those who have allowed it know it is true, but only after the fact.”

All of this is from Fr. Richard’s Introduction, the setting of the table. If you draw up to the table, you will find a 13-course meal set before you, with chapters on:

- “The First Half of Life”
- “Necessary Suffering”
- “A Second Simplicity”
- “The Shadowlands”
- “Falling Upward,” and eight more

But before beginning, before even opening your napkin (or Kindle), it’s important to recognize that **Falling Upward** is not offered as a roadmap to the second half journey. Since we are not in charge of it, we do not need and do not get detailed driving directions and checkpoints and notices of upcoming vistas.

We do get glimpses—gained through experienced and thoughtful eyes—of what can lie ahead for us, and reports left behind by some who have gone before. These are not directions, since the journey is something that happens to us . . . *if we are open to it*. “**God wants to offer this gift in one way or another to all God’s children,**” Henri Nouwen wrote in *Bread for the Journey*, “**but we must desire it. We must be attentive and interiorly alert.**”

And this may be just the point. Glimpses and words don’t define and don’t restrict. But they can help us to desire to be on the journey . . . and they can encourage us to be attentive to what we are seeing . . . and to be alert to what we are feeling.

Falling upward, it seems, is finding our true selves. And finding our true selves is finding our way home.



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“Going on 84 and Going Strong . . .”  
“Falling Upward: Psalms, Sung and Prayed . . .”



## AFTERWORDS: “Falling Upward: *Psalms*, Sung and Prayed . . .”

The *Psalms* somehow seem to get better as the years go on. Is that why Benedict set forth in his *Rule*, written fifteen hundred years ago, that monks must read through all of the *Psalms*, each and every week? Why they are so often called the “prayer book of the *Bible*”? Why the *Psalms* after two millennia are still the most turned-to book in the Scriptures?

The answer to why seems easy when one remembers words—and feelings—known and cherished since childhood: “*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help . . . This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it . . . What is man that thou art mindful of him? . . . Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me . . . I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord . . . The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . .*” (and countless more). . . .

But what isn't so easy (if all of the *Psalms* are to be equally sung and prayed) are other words and feelings: “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; I cry by night, but find no rest . . . How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? . . . Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice . . .*”

Beginning to include *Psalms* of anguish and crying out (so often passed over in earlier years), might be acknowledging that all aspects of human experience and feelings are appropriate for our prayers, and for the *Psalms*. But maybe the full answer is richer than that. For we almost never really change unless something powerful happens. As Richard Rohr says in his book, [Page 7 above] we seem to have an almost built-in tendency to “stay on the path we are already on, even if it is going nowhere.” It's almost a human working out, he adds, of a basic law of nature: a body in motion tends to remain in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an outside force.

If this be so, it may be that even *Psalms* 23—one of those that has always seemed reassuring (and “easier” to read)—is wiser than one had realized. For it seems to be suggesting that we have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, that descending into the valley is necessary if we are to grow, if true transformation . . . if rebirth is to happen.

And if this be so, perhaps the full lesson of the *Psalms*, sung and prayed all the way through, is that descending into the valley should lead—not to shadowland—but to surrender (just look at the ending verses of each and every *Psalms* of crying out). . . . Falling Upward is the way home.