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# Rohr's "Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life" and Smith's "Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential" - Book Review

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**Richard Rohr**

***Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life***

*San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011 hb 236pp \$20.00*

*ISBN 978-0-470-90775-7*

**Gordon T. Smith**

***Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential***

*Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011 pb 269pp \$17.00*

*ISBN 978-0-8308-3354-6*

Are educators' vocational questions different from those that other people ask? Some of our questions certainly do differ. But many of our questions parallel those asked by people in all kinds of work. Does my work make a difference to my neighbor or to the world? Is this good work? Does it honor God? Is this the work I should be doing? Does my work bring me joy? In these two titles, a Catholic and a Protestant offer educators (and everyone) rich insights into vocation. I recommend them to educators because both books address the vocational questions educators ask and because Smith addresses a (short) section of his book directly to educators. Interestingly, Smith also lists Rohr as an influence on his own thinking about vocation.

The kernel of Rohr's argument will be familiar to those who have read Jung or his followers. James Hollis, for example, argues in *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Gotham, 2005) that middle adults need to confront their shadow side if they are to develop a mature self and not live a life based only on ego. Rohr, both a Jungian and a Franciscan, makes the same argument but attends to the spiritual dimension much more carefully than Hollis or other Jungians might be inclined to do. He moves back and forth seamlessly between psychology and spirituality, always building on a foundation of Scripture. He raises the hard vocational and spiritual questions of midlife in a way that consistently left me writing ideas and quotations in my journal.

For Rohr, our lives are guaranteed to include bumps and surprises. In Rohr's language, at some point we will lose; we will encounter a crisis—a "stumbling stone" (p. 65)—that we cannot power, finesse, or manage our way through, that we cannot "*fix, control, explain, change, or even understand*" (p. 69, italics his). Following the "Stumbling over the Stumbling Stone" chapter, Rohr reminds his readers that suffering is necessary. Most contemporary educators are working under one or another kind of financial gun, and we know that suffering is necessary, even if we wish it weren't. On Rohr's telling, this suffering helps us leave home—the stationary place where we are most comfortable—and it can drive us toward the necessary encounter with the self and with the God, who, in fact, walks through the suffering with us.

Most readers will warm to Rohr's accessible writing, to his vision of a loving God, and to witty sentences such as "I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day" (p. 128). But not all will want to read about the necessity of admitting that we have constructed a *persona* (of the person we wish we were and want others to see) or of confronting our *shadow side* as the prerequisite for emerging into later adulthood as the kind of people that others might want to work or live near. For Rohr, mature adulthood entails anxiety, doubt, and paradox. It involves admitting that I and my group might not be right, news that some will not want to hear.

Christians who have found the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator a useful tool for developing increased understanding of human behavior, or others with some exposure to Jung (including Gordon Smith, pp. 59–60) will quickly recognize Rohr's language. Some may initially find some of his concepts foreign but will nonetheless find themselves agreeing that such concepts have great explanatory power.

Educators should read Rohr's book. Although he wrote it for Christians in all professions, the questions he addresses seem to be precisely the questions educators ask. Perhaps he had educators in mind. Perhaps educators simply ask the same questions as everyone else. Perhaps Rohr is simply a good writer. Without offering speculative answers to these questions, let me simply recommend Rohr to any educator wondering about the links between vocation, spirituality, and how God works in us during difficult times.

Smith's book appeared in 2011 as a revised edition of his 1999 book by the same title. I admit to having read it for the joint purpose of copyedit-

ing it for typesetting errors (as a favor to the author) and for writing this blended review with Rohr's book. Like Rohr, Smith writes in accessible, conversational language, allowing the reader to focus on the contents of the story he develops.

His argument proceeds in this way. In the first two chapters, "Stewards of Our Lives" and "The Meaning of Our Work," Smith makes it clear that there is, in a sense, no avoiding the heavy responsibility we carry as people who respond to God's call. He speaks generally in these chapters, not specifically to educators, although at many times educators may feel like Smith has access to their e-mail. However, these chapters have the potential to give readers not just a sense of responsibility, but also of liberty. For example, his distinction between *career* and *vocation* (p. 47) would offer hope to many educators I know who struggle to sort out whether to keep teaching where they presently teach or to seek another post. It might also serve as a potentially liberating rebuke to those educators who seem unable to do anything but work.

In "Seeking Congruence" (ch. 3) Smith opens up the links between vocation and identity. Again, he does not direct the chapter directly at educators, but the chapter feels at many points like he has done so. There is a sense in which most educators can say, "I am a teacher," with the *am* in that sentence in red, bold italics. Fair enough, that's the question of identity. But educators face a constant challenge: how to sort out that identity with particular reference to the needs educators see around them. In the last pages of this chapter, Smith takes pains to make clear that the world's needs do not constitute the Christian's call. In saying that, he offers further liberation to educators, especially those who work with students from bleak economic or cultural circumstances.

The middle chapters of *Courage and Calling* contain much wisdom about vocation, finding vocation, placing limits on the demands our work makes on us, realizing the meanings of integrity and excellence in our work, and the ability to reflect and to be present. A few gems stand out. For example, Smith talks about the three great temptations faced by Christ, as recorded by the gospel writers: power, material security, prestige (p. 135). Smith notes that those temptations affect us all as we engage in our work. In fact, most readers, if they are like me, will think of someone (else) who has given in to one or more of these temptations.

In chapter 7 Smith examines four specific callings: business, the arts, education, religious leadership. Pages 163–167, which he gives over to the vocation of teaching, are packed and dense. Readers of Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), Mark Schwehn’s *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), or Susan VanZanten’s *Joining the Mission: A Guide for New Faculty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) will recognize the neighborhood in which Smith works here; he doesn’t say much that readers of this genre will not have seen before. But the net effect of this section will be positive. Those whose vocation truly is teaching will find affirmation in these few pages. Would that every day, someone would say to us all, as Smith has done here, “Thanks be to God for our teachers, those who have taught us with wisdom and patience, who have led us into greater understanding and given us courage to live well” (p. 167).

Smith does not think that fulfilling one’s vocation is a walk in the park. He deals with failure in “The Cross We Bear” (ch. 10), and he opens up some of the realities of working in the kinds of imperfect organizations in which all of us find ourselves (ch. 11). That is, Smith deals with the same bumps and surprises that Rohr addressed in *Falling Upward*. But in his final chapter, “The Ordered Life,” Smith ends as he started, by setting both his project and the question of our vocation in a deeply and satisfyingly theological and biblical framework. In fact the ease with which both Smith and Rohr set the vocational conversation in biblical and theological categories is a great strength of both books. In these books, the biblical/theological dimension always feels foundational; it’s never “the faith piece,” as some are wont to call it these days.

Rohr and Smith did not direct these books on vocation directly to educators. But either they both seemed to know who would read their work, or it turns out that our questions are similar to those of other professionals. Whichever is the right answer, I recommend these titles on vocation to any educator asking about vocation. And in my experience, that’s almost all of us.

*Ken Badley*