

## *Falling Upward: aka mid-life awakenings in Cali*

*Colossians 3:1-4; 12-17; Acts 9:1-19*

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For three days Saul was blind... he neither ate nor drank ... for three days... Saul, once so full of vhem. and vigor, so certain that he was right to persecute and jail those converting to Christianity... Now struck dumb and blind through an encounter with the Risen Christ...

Modern medicine would term Saul's condition *Amaurosis fugax*.

*Amaurosis* is a Greek word meaning darkening.

Patients who experience this temporary blindness describe the onset like a veil or shade being lowering down over their eyes....

Foo-gax is Latin for fleeting or temporary

Temporary Blindness.

To me, it makes perfect sense that Saul's body and mind temporarily shut down ... his senses hitting the pause button for time to process what has just happened.

Three days... days to think, days to reflect... days to discern the message from God in how Saul is to change his ways...

From priest and theologian, Richard Rohr's perspective, those three days gave Saul the opportunity to begin to transform from a Junior into an Elder.

In Rohr's book, *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the two halves of life* Rohr proposes that there are two halves of life into which most of us live that can either nurture our souls or suffocate God's given intent for our spirits.

Rohr explains that the first half of life is when we are tasked with building our life container-- our identity; the focus being on not only survival but developing who we are to succeed in society.

Our containers contain our work, our families, our choices of neighborhoods, memberships to certain groups; developing and espousing our values to those around us; keeping company with those who make us look good by society's standards. We might even choose to only associate with those who look and think like we do. When we are in this phase of life, we are Juniors.

Juniors are most often young, energetic, go getters...

They are the people that we know who are very certain about what they think and are passionate to share their convictions with you. In other words, as Rohr writes: "If one talks too much and too loudly, shares their opinions in an attempt to convince you they are right, then that person is probably a junior"...

Just to be clear.... *Being a junior is not a bad thing.*

It is a necessary step in life from childhood to adulthood.

All of us go through being a junior.

Certainly, in the book of Acts before Saul encounters the Risen Christ, He is a junior.

At some point in each of our lives, something monumental happens that gives us great pause...

Maybe it is some kind of loss

a failing...

maybe it is a revelation that things are not what we thought they would be...

Whatever the happening... we are given cause to stop, reflect, and rethink who we are and our priorities....

This happening invites us to examine life differently... and in hind sight of the happening... we are forever changed... our mind and body are awake and alive in a way like never before... and we are ready to redefine the contents in our life containers.

Rohr calls this process: "falling upward" ....

We fall...

We fall away from the need to be in the spotlight and to be successful by society's standards; we fall upwards and towards the second half of our lives...

For the Christian community... this second half of our lives is a time when we willingly and joyfully replace the content our life container... we remove the items we believed would make us successful by society's standards, and we replace it with meaningful experiences and people who share our desire to live Christ centered lives. Deeper, more meaningful, less self-focused and driven lives.

As we become Elders, we grow less rigid and opinionated... we listen more than we speak... We welcome the grey areas where things are not black and white but are somewhere inbetween... and we look forward to the opportunity to grow...

Falling Upward happens to people at different stages of their life's journey. For some, it happens as a young adult. Others—a mid-life awakening... still others do not fall upwards until the children are gone, we retire, and we are left to examine who we are to be now that we have 30-40 years left.

The story of Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus is indeed an example of an junior falling upward

Through this holy encounter and intervention... Paul re-examines the values in his life container: He later writes to the church in Colossae

"clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> clothe yourselves with love,"

When the scales fall from Paul's eyes, his weaknesses are revealed... he is no longer blind to his bias, his judgmental nature, his exclusionary posture towards the people of God.

He is humble in accepting these blind spots and recognizes how to live differently.

Do you know what some of your blind spots are?

They can be attitudes or postures we present to the others that promote our opinions, our dislikes, our biases.

Blind spots might be difficult to recognize and even more painful to claim... but if we are willing to do the hard work of introspection, we can let the metaphorical scales fall from our eyes and honestly see that these postures and attitudes mask fears, weaknesses, flaws. They even offer us an opportunity to change.

Most often our blind spots are contrary to living into the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians: Remember those?

Paul says that as chosen people we are not to live by the things of this world that are desired by the flesh... but we are to live by the fruit of the Spirit with

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, goodness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Those who live by the fruit of the spirit are indeed elders and have deep faith and character.

In his book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks states that each and every one of us has tendencies toward selfishness, pride, greed, vanity, gluttony and envy.... On our own, we cannot become mature in the deepest qualities of character: those of courage, honesty, humility...

He writes, “We need redemptive assistance from outside: from God, family, friends, traditions, exemplars” <sup>1</sup>

Drawing from outside sources helps us face our weaknesses and grow  
Sometimes facing these blind spots is because we are made to by others... but sometimes we have an extraordinary encounter that quiets us and challenges us to examine our current thought processes. When the awaken to a new vision and perspective.

Have you ever had an extraordinary encounter that has quieted you? An event or revelation where you have re-examined your attitude towards someone or something and re-emerged differently?

I have...

This past June, I flew across the country to California to take the fourth of my six classes at SFTS... working toward my doctorate in pastoral care and counseling....

Unlike previous classes I have taken, I admit I was dreading this class. Ask my patient colleagues on staff... or my supportive family.. I drove everyone crazy with my complaining.... And whiny.... Wooh was I whiny.... First: there were enormous amounts of readings to do ahead of time: two HUGE textbooks and memorizing the glossary for one of them. And case studies... I had to write and turn in case studies...

But more than anything, I just felt the class was completely irrelevant to me in my role as your pastor.

The course was called “Interfaith and intercultural counseling”

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, pg. 264.

As in, counseling people of different faiths... and counseling people culturally different than myself...

Umm... I am a white, southern, Presbyterian pastor who counsels white southern Presbyterian member.... Hello????

The main textbook that we were to be well versed in was called "Counseling the Culturally Diverse." A 900 page comprehensive textbook written by a husband and wife psychology team, Derald Wing Sue and David Sue.

The first chapter defined and explained the obstacles to becoming a culturally competent counselor, predominantly through sharing stories about students who took the class with the authors and their reactions to the textbook. Some stories shared that students were furious at the requirement to take class that didn't apply to them. Students were insulted that the authors assumed that they might be biased against or towards another race or someone raised differently from them.

***The authors included those stories to share why this class should be required for all future counselors:***

The theory and practice of western counseling, as it has evolved in the last 40 years, have blind spots. The US population has grown racially diverse and this means that there is an important need for counselors to be multi-culturally competent . Thus this textbook, the only one of its kind, was to be taught to bridge that gap for future counselors.

To become a culturally competent counselor one is to be well versed and sensitive to the values, the needs, the implications when counseling Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Latinos and Latinas, Jewish Americans, Arab and Muslim Americans....

Still not sure how this class would apply to me, I read my books, prepared my papers, and packed for a week in sunny Cali!

I arrived late Sunday evening. I woke up Monday morning to read a last minute email from the professor that caused even more grumbling from me. All students taking his class must attend the chapel service at 8:30 am each morning. Miffed that I had to be at the seminary 30 minutes early, I packed my backpack and walked through the neighborhood to the seminary.

The temperature was 70 degrees and no humidity.... The seminary was constructed at the top of a steep hill in 1871. The architecture is stunning. Many students affectionately call the campus "Hogwarts."

At the top of the steep hill is the chapel... upon entering, I heard gospel music playing. The seminary chaplain sat in a circle of chairs, her eyes closed, swaying to the music.

After a few minutes of students gathering and settling in, Ruth read to us a passage from the Book of Job

It is the voice of the youngest friend who has come to support Job and try and find meaning in his suffering.

Elihu, who has been silent until now, finally voices his thoughts:

"I am young in years,

and you are old;  
 that is why I was fearful,  
 not daring to tell you what I know.  
<sup>7</sup> I thought, 'Age should speak;  
 advanced years should teach wisdom.'  
<sup>8</sup> But it is the spirit<sup>[b]</sup> in a person,  
 the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding."

After reading the passage several times, Ruth asked us this question:

"Recall a time you were afraid to speak for fear of not being heard?"

Recall a time I was afraid to speak for fear of not being heard?

I sat and pondered... was there an instance when I felt that my voice would not be heard?  
 I remained silent...

She dismissed us in silence, and I walked to the adjacent building for class ... still thinking... As a youth and young adult, I was always encouraged to speak up and share my thoughts and my opinions... in college and seminary... here at FPC...

Was there ever a time I was afraid to speak? PAUSE

Have you ever felt that way? Where you were afraid to speak for fear of not being heard?

Class began and the professor introduced himself:

Dr. Schipani, a seventy-year old man from Argentina, a Mennonite pastor and professor of pastoral care and counseling.

He stated the goal for the course: to become culturally competent as caregivers

Cultural competence, for Dr. Schipani, is defined as having an in depth understanding of diverse attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, practices and communication patterns attributable to a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, socio economic status, physical and mental ability, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Only when this knowledge and practice are thoroughly understood that then we would be considered culturally competent to counsel those different than us.

I glanced around the room at my fellow classmates:

There were three Roman Catholic priests who one from Ghana, one from Nigeria, and one from Tamil Nadu, India.

An African American male pastor who serves an AME Zion church in Berkley.  
 A female African American pastor who serves the United Church of Christ in Fairfield, California.

A Jewish woman, granddaughter of a holocaust survivor, who identifies as a Buddhist in her spiritual practices and is a certified chaplain who conducts grief workshops for those who believe in a higher power.

And then there was me. White, southern, Presbyterian pastor...

Following his opening remarks, the professor asked us to introduce ourselves, share about our context for ministry, and to share why we were taking this course.

Well, you know me... I love to talk! Love to volunteer to kick things off and warm up the room, sharing about myself and make jokes to put others at ease.... I am usually one of those students who has no problem jumping in... but I found myself paralyzed and silent..

Silent because I was suddenly remembering chapter one of the textbook... the one where students had been complaining about taking the class and were insulted that there were assumptions of biases towards minorities...

Silent as the wise words from my friend and colleague, Shannon Johnson Kershner came to my mind...

You remember Shannon from Fourth Church in Chicago, our Mullin Forum preacher and teacher last year?

She had shared this profound insight :

“For the Presbyterian Church USA to begin thriving, not just existing, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to blow in and through us... we have to figure out how to give the microphone to others who have, as our Brief Statement of Faith says, “have long been silenced” ... “our call right now is to listen to a radically inclusive collection of voices as they tell us what is important to them about their faith and their church and how they are trying to live out their baptism in the world.”

So, since I was representing the P.C. USA, since God had for some reason silenced by voice and my body...

I sat still and listened... really listened...

Listened and drank in the diversity of these people whom I now, eight months later, call my friends...

Listened and learned about who they were, the sacrifices they had made to follow God’s call into ministry...

Listened for how and why this class was so important for them. How much they had been looking forward to coming to the class. How grateful they were that professionals were finally addressing the need for cultural competence in counseling...

PAUSE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The first service that one owes to the others in the fellowship consists in listening to them.”

And so I did just that... I listened and had my awakening as to what why I was there and what it was that I needed to learn that week.

I did not WANT to go first...

I wanted to first to be quiet and learn...

That whole week, I found myself talking less and listening more...  
I indeed learned what it meant to give the microphone to others.

I met people whom I would have never met from all walks of life who shared openly and deeply....

Now my story may come across to you as my being very naïve... but for me it was an awakening... how often do I spend seven hours a day with people so vastly different from me? It was as if scales had fallen from my eyes...

Have you ever had one of those moments? A moment when your perspective and vision are so altered that it was as if scales fell from your eyes?

During our last session together on Friday, the professor shared with us why he had required for us to go to chapel each day...

He said that one of the unspoken goals of the class was to become culturally humble... for pastors and counselors to truly engage with others required self-reflection and self-critique... to become culturally humble we must be open to and cultivate the desire of developing partnerships with people and groups different from ourselves, and to be an advocate to fix power imbalances that should never have existed in the first place. This happens in sacred spaces such as chapel time. Chapel gave us time for new perspective of those with whom we studied...

How very wise....

Finally, to close out the class, he asked us to go around the room and share something we had learned from each other...

Some new insight from our classmates we would take away... This time, I was eager to jump in voicing all I had learned from my new friends..

As the time ended, one of my classmates looked at me and said,

“Dolly, you have given me hope in the white race” ...

I was stunned... I had not realized that he had not had a positive opinion of white people the whole week...

he had been respectful when he spoke  
we had eaten lunch together in the dining hall and shared stories with me.

It dawned on me that maybe... just maybe... scales had fallen from his eyes too...

Every time I leave left San Francisco, I am a different person...

But this class, this one in particular, changed me, deepened me...

Scales that I did not know needed to fall away- fell away... for me and for each of my classmates... and when sight was restored it was vision unlike before... broader, deeper, wider...

And I think maybe, just maybe, I am beginning to understand how it feels to fall upward.