

Understanding the Two Halves of Life

Exploring who developed it, why it is relevant to us and what it means for us in more detail



What is the two halves of life?

First developed by Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist, psychiatrist and psychotherapist, born in the 19th century, the two halves of life is a psychological and spiritual concept. It aims to help us to understand and make sense of our own psychological and spiritual development.

Being a friend of Sigmund Freud, Jung first had glimmers of such a notion when he worked with his clients in their mid-life. He noticed that his mid-life clients were approaching life with the same mindset that they had grown up with, and that it wasn't working.

"One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning. For what was good in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true, will by the evening have become a lie."

Carl Jung



On further research, Jung uncovered that during our first half of life, our focus is of an ego-centric (or personality-led) world, whilst during the second half, we can move to a soul-centric (or authentic self-led) world.

"The first half of life is devoted to forming a healthy ego, the second half is going inward and letting go of it."

Carl Jung

In the 20th century, Richard Rohr, an American, Franciscan priest born in Albuquerque, New Mexico took Jung's thinking forward. Within 'Falling Upwards', Rohr eloquently describes further this psychological and spiritual journey.

Why is this relevant for us now?

Within our society, we can often sense a desire for growth and continual improvement (Ridgway and Brown, 2025). The mantra of wanting to deliver more from the same resources, or deliver the same from less, is so imperceptible, that it may become second nature to us. This acceleration mindset can



be viewed as an inherent part of a modern capitalist society (Ridgway et al., 2024).

With these increasing demands for acceleration, our societal and environmental systems can become under pressure, out of sync and can burn. In addition, individually we may feel this sense of pressure ourselves, which may lead to psychological burn out. We may feel lost, a sense of meaninglessness and alienation.

"We sense that something is missing in our lives and search the world for it, now understanding that what is missing is us."

Parker, J. Palmer, 2004

Exploring the first-half of life

A necessary developmental goal of the personality in the first-half of life is the maturation of the ego. In essence, it is self-centred, with us establishing ourselves in accordance to the rules and norms of our family, friends and society. Decisions include our career, friendship networks and partner choices.

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Through these decisions and actions, we build our sense of security, identity and success within our world. Such sub-conscious actions are crucial for our psychological development, helping to give us a sense of purpose, importance and place in the world.

Experiencing the watershed

Moving from the first to the second half of life can be termed the watershed, almost like moving from one valley system to another. Whilst this transition can start from 30+ years (Parke, 2023), if it happens for us, it occurs when we need to and when we are ready.

This spiritual and psychological growth is often triggered by a falling, perhaps related to our job, wealth, reputation or family. Here our established way of living doesn't work anymore, but it is during this falling that in fact we rise. Here our ego is challenged to become a servant to our soul or authentic self, containing us so that we can weather the human world.

Exploring the second-half of life

Now our work is perhaps more about unbecoming everything that isn't really us, so that we can be who we were meant to be in the first place (Brandford, 2024), beginning to let go.

"The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are."

Carl Jung

So, exploring what we need to release and peel away. By doing this, we are better able to connect with our essence, and reveal and offer our unique contribution to the world.

"Your greatest gift to the world is your inner light."

Brandford, 2024

So, life is less about planning, and striving for a future-state, it is more about being present, releasing and connecting into ourselves. Here we can begin to notice the subtle signs of what draws and lifts us, and how we are best to contribute. By surrendering to the flow of life, occurrences will manifest and we will sense our path.

During this second-half, we have nothing to prove or protect. Long ago we have let go of the need to be right, win or be the best. The hall of mirrors that we may have previously enjoyed, may become unhelpful. Consequently, we are less offended, hurt or controlled.

By being present and connected, we are more able to access our inner wisdom that has been there all along. This enables us to see more clearly.

"Much of the work of mid-life is to tell the difference between those who are dealing with their issues through you, and those who are dealing with you."

Rohr, 2011

We are more able to see unhelpful human dynamics and let things flow over us in the moment. Consequently, our

experience of life can feel like a return to simplicity, light, love, peace, joy and bliss (Rohr, 2011).

What does this mean for me?

If any of this resonates with you, then it may be about noticing what you are drawn to.

Connecting with like-minded souls can support our own psychological and spiritual growth, along with other avenues of learning.

Top tip



Rohr's book is a beautiful read:

Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life – Richard Rohr

ISBN: 9780470907757

The Retreat Handbook is published by the Retreat Association, and lists retreat houses across the UK



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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and writer. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

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