

Upward Falling

One Man's Journey for Truth

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Contents

Introduction.....	i
1. The Mystery of the Valley.....	1
2. Hope That Is Seen.....	7
3. Higher Education.....	19
4. Uncivil Rights	25
5. In the War Zone	35
6. Drafted.....	51
7. “Morn”	63
8. CIA Calling.....	73
9. Home Again.....	85
10. Vision Quest	95
11. The Art and Craft of Life.....	109
12. Workout.....	119
13. Effendi and His Dervishes	129
14. Meeting Jesus.....	139
15. Married Life	153
16. Tibetan Interlude.....	161
17. Revived	179
18. Shock Waves	191
19. Faith Supplements.....	201
20. Secret Life.....	221
21. The Messiah Wars	233
22. The Scandal of the Cross	251
23. Real-Time Messiah.....	267
Afterword.....	279
The Way Forward	285
Acknowledgments.....	286
About the Author.....	289

Song of the Mountain

Faint at first,
fine filament of sound on the breeze
tickles the ear,
like a ringing that comes from nowhere
but air
murmuring high notes.
No low notes break through.
I am filled with wonder.

Down the valley
trickles of fluent sound
take time to play percussive
pebbles along the way.
A game of hide-and-seek:
“Find me if you can.”
In the valley I seek and search.
Nowhere but the breeze
reveals a single source.
Higher up I climb, and higher still.
All I hear beneath bird cries
are living waters of the snowmelt,
frozen peaks gurgling back to life.
Surprise!
“Here?”
“No, here.”
“Near?”
“I ammm...”

Come now. Listen
to the song of the mountain
inviting softly in the sweet
alpine air.

Introduction

I was born with a taste for adventure and a knack for recording what I observed. For many years that looked like short articles, professional research reports, and bookshelves full of copious notebooks. Eventually it felt like I was collecting a lot of souvenirs without knowing where to put them. Then a few years ago in the span of little over an hour, five total strangers I met at a conference told me they thought I was supposed to write my life story. That's when this book began to take shape.

As my story unfolded, it took on three perspectives: adventures, understanding, and timeless reality. The first speaks of things I saw and experienced. The second focuses on ideas that helped explain what I observed, and the third addresses some overarching implications of what I've learned.

Wonderment and Boundaries

In my youth I approached almost everything with a sense of wonder and curiosity, as if there were no limit to what could be seen. It was part of being born in America when hope and entitlement resounded far and wide. Before long I was off to college, and soon on to Europe and beyond, soaking up the great beauty and diversity of lands, people, and cultures in our remarkable world.

My first summer break from college, I traveled to Germany in search of my father's ancestral home. Someone said it was possible to see the new wall separating East from West Berlin, and even walk freely through Checkpoint Charlie to look at the wall from the communist side. Sounded great! A day's hitchhike later I was in East Berlin, taking pictures beneath a sign that said: *Achtung! Fotografieren Forboten!* I knew what it meant, but no

UPWARD FALLING

one was around, so I snapped away. In less than a minute, three soldiers with machine guns appeared out of nowhere, grabbed my brand-new camera, and took me to an East Berlin police station. All I could think to do was demand to see “my” American ambassador, which I repeated as insistently as possible, saying it in English again and again like dripping water. Finally, a stone-faced officer gave in, kept the film, returned the camera, and ordered me out of East Berlin. He didn’t even crack a smile when I gave him my home address and jauntily asked him to return the pictures they didn’t need after they were developed.



Berlin Wall Watch Tower

Image from Library of Congress.

What triggered that whole experience were the guns sticking out of a watchtower in the no-man’s-land near the barbed wire-topped wall. I’d never seen real machine guns before and wanted pictures to show my friends what the communists were up to. Little did I realize at that time that I would be drawn again and again to boundaries where human conflict arises. Good fences may make good neighbors, but to me the bad barriers I would encounter in my many journeys cried out for fresh inspiration to surmount seemingly insuperable differences.

In this book you'll find my notes from boundary-challenging adventures across various seasons of life, beginning with the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam war zone. My penchant for observation soon branched out to more subtle margins in the world of tribal shamans, mystics, and religions outside the limits of my childhood Lutheranism. What I experienced convinced me a powerful realm of the spirit exists beyond the boundary of what can be seen with the naked eye. That made me wonder what else I might be missing simply because I couldn't see it. This is how I became a seeker after spiritual truth, taking notes along the way.

Wonderous Beauty

My mother often dragged me to concerts and art museums against my boyish will, but those ventures awakened me to the power of great art to move the heart. I'm forever grateful. By way of contrast, my father unwittingly opened my eyes to transcendent natural beauty when he restored an old fishing cottage on an Indiana lake, surrounded by lush hills, woods, and flowered fields rich in wildlife. I paddled and fished every stretch of that lake in a canoe and hiked every bit of undeveloped shoreline.

Later, when I was in one of the most breathtakingly beautiful remote wildernesses I'd ever seen, I was so overwhelmed by solitude amidst the natural beauty that an entirely different kind of quest began to stir in my heart. That journey led, after many complicated detours, to a beautiful woman I loved with whom I could share my inner life and appreciation for spiritual seeking. Our marriage precipitated a new set of notes about the challenges of shaping boundaries in everyday life in an extended modern family. It would prove as arduous at times as my trekking in the Himalayas.

UPWARD FALLING

Lost and Found

I like to say that the ultimate truth I sought found me instead of the other way around. It occurred halfway through my life with my wife-to-be at my side. You'll find that story at the midpoint of this book. I don't want to spoil it by telling you more here, but it's the best thing that ever happened to me, to us—and my wife definitely agrees.

My notes took yet another turn after that. I began documenting what was going on in my thoughts and feelings as I struggled to reconcile what I had become with who I knew I needed to be. That's how I discovered the secret place built into every human soul that lies deeper than the usual boundaries of thinking and feeling. Learning to live from this secret place became for me the greatest adventure of all.

Grappling with Big Ideas

In college, I was surprised to discover that big ideas attracted my interest as much as distant lands and people, so it was natural to include in this book a few thoughts about the ideas and belief systems I saw converging in the world around me. You'll find those observations starting in the chapter called "Messiah Wars." That's a term I settled on to encapsulate the conflicting forces that affect our lives so profoundly today. It's all about what we perceive as ultimate reality.

Big ideas are more important than many people seem to realize. Basic concepts like freedom, rights, and justice are huge enough to propel waves of history yet reach down deeply to impact personal choices we make every day. It's important to sort out the values and boundaries we hold most dear, which I hope my notes will help you do.

An Ancient Perspective

The last chapters of my book highlight the largest people movement of the twentieth century, which I was surprised to discover hidden in the thickets of life. Just when nihilists, utopians, and tyrants were sharpening their weapons to kill off faith in God and carve out vast, new, secular empires, the Pentecostal/Charismatic faith revolution caught fire—more than a hundred years ago. Despite appearances to the contrary, it's still gaining fresh momentum in the third decade of the twenty-first century, and is projected to grow from some 650 million in 2020 to as many as a billion people by 2050. (That's counting only a subset of all Christians, who are projected by Pew Research to total 3.3 billion people by then.)

In this context, a small thing in the Bible once caught my eye—the tiny tribe of Issachar in ancient Israel. Numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands and tens of thousands, like the other tribes of Israel, Issachar seemed inconsequential in the scheme of things. Yet the text says the people of Issachar “understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). I have long identified with their mission, not so much for Israel as for helping anyone alive right now trying to figure out how they're supposed to move forward in our anxiety-provoking times.

If you're tired of laboring anxiously without clear purpose or contentment, one of my goals is to assure you there's a fulfilling way of living that surpasses everyday understanding and brings joy and peace—even in the midst of the confounding craziness of life. It's both rational and based on faith for what can't be explained inside the normal boundaries of life and reason.

Here's the catch. In my travels I often ventured into the unknown with little more than a wisp of hope and a nod of faith

UPWARD FALLING

in the direction I was headed—only to realize that instead of arriving at a peak of attainment, I kept falling into a morass of obstacles that had to be overcome. It took longer than I care to admit to reach the truth I was seeking, but my longing was not in vain. The reward that eventually came lifted me again and again out of the chaos and into a deeply satisfying kind of understanding and peace. My life literally unfolded by learning from my setbacks to fail forward and fall ever upward against the natural gravity of the world.

A Practical Note about This Book

One of my writing goals has been to convey the spirit of the times that led up to the pivotal era we're now experiencing. You'll see some asides, endnotes tagging experiences, sources, historical highlights, and related reflections to help fill out this picture.

Incidentally, the small flames on the drop caps that begin each chapter are a nod to the flicker of life that burns in every human being. However small that spark may seem at first, it's meant to be tended until it becomes a life-giving flame that enlightens your heart and brightens the world around you, around all of us.

There's so much more to the adventure of life than we first realize.