

The Left Atrium

Falling in place

Learning to fall: the blessings of an imperfect life

Philip Simmons

Sandwich (NH): Homefarm Books; 2001

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Mrs. R. looked tired, yet her eyes were piercing and her voice determined. “Bal, I need a new way of looking at all of this, something to read. What can you recommend?” For four years we had been patient and physician companions on the unpredictable course of her advanced cancer. I admired her courage and insight, her tenacity and determination. “I think I have just the book for you,” I responded.

Whether we encounter the threat of death as a patient, family member or professional caregiver, we find ourselves confronted by the mysteries that have haunted the human condition since we first acquired the ability to contemplate our own transience. We sense our existential aloneness with quickened pulse. We seek islands of meaning in a sea of unknowing. Philip Simmons’ *Learning to Fall: the Blessings of an Imperfect Life* has earned a permanent place on my bedside table. It helped Mrs. R. Perhaps it may be a help to someone you know.

Philip Simmons was 35 years old when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Married, with two young children and a promising career as an English professor and writer, he suddenly found himself enrolled in one of life’s most challenging immersion courses. To date he had celebrated life’s highs and lows with a keen eye and an inquiring mind. Now this!

Simmons has been at a tough school for the past eight years, but now, with the publication of this remarkable book, we are the beneficiaries. For all his disarming honesty and lack of pretense it is evident that Simmons is no ordinary student. He writes, “beyond the dualities of feast and famine we’ve

glimpsed something else: the blessings shaken out of an imperfect life like fruit from a blighted tree ... This book is for those ready to embrace this third way, the way through loss to a wholeness, richness, and depth we had never before envisioned.”

Learning to Fall consists of twelve richly textured, highly entertaining, always informative essays on everything from mud to family life, from the matting practices of frogs to the musings of Marcus Aurelius. With curiosity and wit Simmons introduces us to the mundane yet sacred corners of his world. With “purposeful awareness” and “alert calm” our gifted guide points us toward

the healing depths within, the inner peace that is our potential. We come to see through his eyes the wonder that can overflow each moment. We are in the hands of a master craftsman. He presents us with countless “Aha!” moments and nuggets of insight as he explores life’s daily experiences — the light and the dark, the savage and the serene — toward a deeper, richer, way.

Learning to Fall is a wonderful achievement. It draws on a wide array of wisdom traditions with discernment, humility and grace. It is never facile, always challenging, uncompromising, yet hopeful. It belongs on the short list of backpack resources for all those who find themselves in need of a guide as they journey to the edge.

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Ethics undone

Culture of death: the assault on medical ethics in America

Wesley J. Smith

San Francisco: Encounter Books; 2001

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Modern hospital practice occasionally puts caregivers and families in agonizing quandaries. When a baby is born with severe defects that are likely to be fatal, are doctors and parents ethically obliged to employ heroic measures, regardless of cost? Can a doctor ethically help terminally ill patients in intractable pain kill themselves? When a woman in the last stages of pregnancy permanently loses all brain function, should clinicians use advanced medical procedures to keep her body going until the baby can be delivered? Is infanticide ever acceptable? What about xenotransplantation?

Such bioethical questions have been

the subject of considerable academic discourse in recent years. In this thought-provoking and contrarian book Wesley J. Smith makes the case that a cadre of academic bioethicists (especially bioethics patriarch Joseph Fletcher and Princeton University’s Peter Singer) has influenced contemporary bioethical thinking and legislation with an overly utilitarian and even heartless stance that devalues human life. (They, in turn, argue that we can no longer rely on traditional ethics for answers to bioethical questions and propose a “new ethics” meant to protect the quality, rather than the sanctity, of human life.)