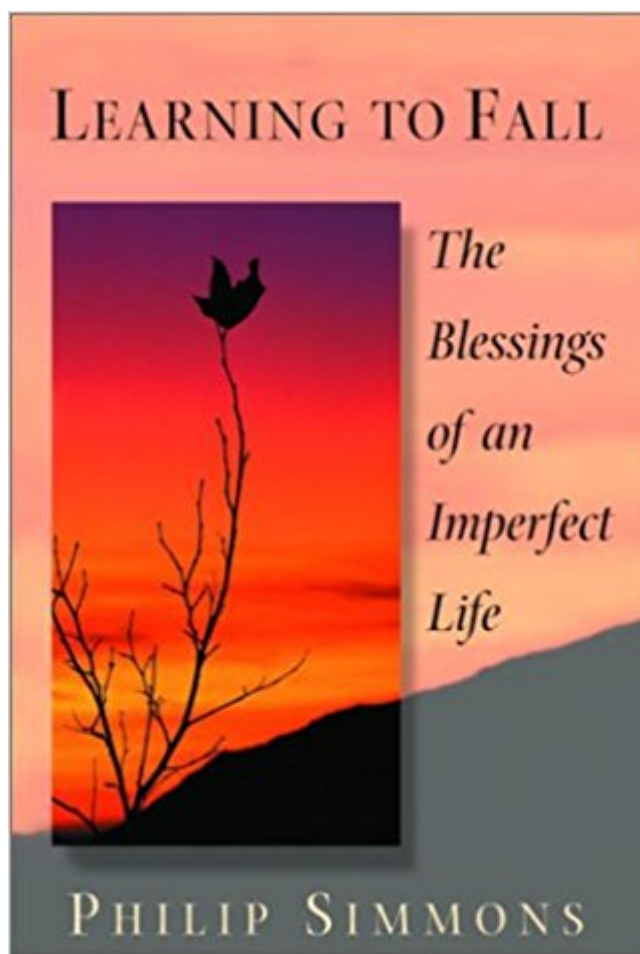


The book was found

Learning To Fall: The Blessings Of An Imperfect Life



Synopsis

Now I find myself in late August, with the nights cool and the crickets thick in the fields. Already the first blighted leaves glow scarlet on the red maples. It's a season of fullness and sweet longings made sweeter now by the fact that I can't be sure I'll see this time of the year again...." from *Learning to Fall*

Philip Simmons was just thirty-five years old in 1993 when he learned that he had ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, and was told he had less than five years to live. As a young husband and father, and at the start of a promising literary career, he suddenly had to learn the art of dying. Nine years later, he has succeeded, against the odds, in learning the art of living. Now, in this surprisingly joyous and spirit-renewing book, he chronicles his search for peace and his deepening relationship with the mystery of everyday life. Set amid the rugged New Hampshire mountains he once climbed, and filled with the bustle of family life against the quiet progression of illness, *Learning to Fall* illuminates the journey we all must take — the work of learning to live richly in the face of loss. "From our first faltering steps, Simmons says, we may fall into disappointment or grief, fall into or out of love, fall from youth or health. And though we have little choice as to the timing or means of our descent, we may, as he affirms, "fall with grace, to grace." With humor, hard-earned wisdom and a keen eye for life's lessons — whether drawn from great poetry or visits to the town dump — Simmons shares his discovery that even at times of great sorrow we may find profound freedom. And by sharing the wonder of his daily life, he offers us the gift of connecting more deeply and joyously with our own. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Living fully in the face of a debilitating fatal illness is the challenge Simmons, then an associate professor of English at Lake Forest College in Illinois, faced when he was told in 1993 he had ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) and had less than five years to live. As his illness progressed, a wheelchair-bound Simmons moved with his wife and two children to southern New Hampshire, near the rugged mountains he once had climbed. Writing in his cabin in view of an old dump, Simmons describes the wonders of nature remembered and still visible from his abode. He tells of his search for life's meaning in a variety of religious and secular texts, among them the story of Jesus, the philosophy of Zen, Sufi and Buddhist masters, medieval Christian mystics, Emerson's essays and the poetry of Yeats. In a wry disclaimer, Simmons notes that learning to live richly in the face of loss is a highly individual undertaking, and adds, "I'm not in the business of issuing directives, offering tips, imposing lists of spiritual dos and don'ts, or providing neat, comforting formulas." Indeed, his little book of thoughtful essays offers no easy solutions to dealing with suffering and sorrow, but it does chronicle how the experience of living at the edge can become an extraordinary connection to the eternal. Agent, Bob Markel. (Jan. 9)Forecast: Few books on loss and death manage to break out to a mass audience, but Bantam's promised publicity and advertising campaign may help this well-written chronicle of a spiritual journey make a strong showing in the marketplace. Xlibris published it last year to much acclaim.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Stricken with Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) at age 35, Simmons left his position as a professor of English to return to his native New Hampshire. The author of numerous articles and one previous book, he has crafted essays out of his reflections, understanding, and observations of everyday rural life. Interwoven throughout is Simmons's theme of letting go as a necessary means of embracing life. With a knack for blending the esoteric and the mundane, Simmons presents his own insight into the well-known messages of Western and Eastern spiritual masters, such as Rumi, the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hahn, and Meister Eckhart. As a family man with a degenerative disease, he writes with a marvelous understanding of acceptance, always knowing that tomorrow you still have to do the laundry. Eschewing the saccharine found in other works of this kind, these engaging essays are recommended for public libraries. Andy Wickens, King Cty. P.L., WA
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I think ALS has got to be one of, if not the, cruelest diseases to a human. The author approaches his predicament in a way that is very much a product of his life experience and background (of course). It makes sense the way he approaches it, and he seems to have done a good job getting his mind around it and making the best of it. His is a very New Englandish, academic, and male worldview. All of which are fine - that is what he knows - and he draws from all of it to make sense of what might seem kind of impossible to make sense of. I think that some of us will relate to his point of view but others won't. You might relate to some of the essays, but not others. Analogies about building houses? Not my thing. I didn't finish some of the essays as it just didn't hold my interest, but that's ok. For various reasons, I didn't really resonate with his point of view, however, I could appreciate it to a degree. I felt compassion for how he dove in and found a way to keep ""Getting Up In The Morning" (my favorite essay). I think all of us with chronic illness or who find ourselves questioning life for whatever reason, have to find our own version of why to keep getting up in the morning. I have great respect for Philip for finding his, and sharing it with the world. I have MS, which is a very different illness with a different set of challenges - but there were some things in this book that I could think about. It struck me as a very academic approach to spirituality. It sounds to me like he rose to the challenge of ALS and did his absolute best to be there for his family, which touches me.

I have been reading this book given to me by a meditation "sister" and highlighting something on almost every page. The author was a literature professor at Lake Forest College in Chicago before being diagnosed with Lou Gherig's disease in his 40s. His spiritual ruminations call on insights from Christianity to Hinduism/Buddhism/Tao to T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens to nature and the seasons in New Hampshire. A gentle, often humorous, and surprisingly hopeful reflection on what life looks like when we have nothing else to lose.

If there's ever a time to heed what someone is saying, it's when that person is dying. Imminent death tends to clear the deck for both the writer and the reader and allows us to be receptive to those ultimate concerns that get obscured and deflected in the bustle of daily life when we assume we have all the time in the world. Phillip Simmons, a college English professor, was in his mid 30's when he was diagnosed with Lou Gherig's disease. As his disease progressed, he left his teaching job and retreated to a rural New Hampshire vacation home with his wife and two children. Fortunately for us, he completed this book in 2002, the same year he succumbed to his illness. Simmons uses falling as an extended metaphor for what happens throughout life--not only at

the end. As he writes in the forward: " ... we deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will someday lose everything. When we learn to fall, we learn that only by letting go our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious--our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves--can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom." Devoid of self-pity, Simmons draws from a rich mix of wisdom (the stoic Marcus Aurelius, the Christian tradition, the Sufi poet, Rumi, and many others) to help illuminate his journey of living and dying. Despite his lamentation that most of us find life to be "not what we had in mind," Simmons finds depth and meaning in his descent. Amazingly, what makes his account so remarkable is that he seems willing to take it--even embrace it--rather than kicking up dust with a posture of heroic resistance. Whether we consciously consider our ultimate fate or consign it to a sealed and hidden container to be examined "later," we all know that we are on a river that flows downward to the sea. What is reassuring about Simmon's account is that we can bow to and find meaning in this great, mystical journey.

I was in a book store last evening and this book lay on a display table surrounded by fifty other books. What attracted me to it? The simple yet beautiful cover art? The title? I'm not sure- but for some reason I picked it up and opened it to a random page, and read, "But maybe we're asking the wrong thing of God. Rhyme and reason, after all, are human values, not divine ones. Wanting human suffering to fit some divine plan is like wanting to fly an airplane over tornado wreckage and see that it spells out song lyrics or a cure for acne." (p.29) In the words of Jerry McGuire, the author had me at hello. I read no further and bought the book. I had a million other things on my to-do list today, and taking half the day to read a book wasn't on the list. But I read. And I couldn't put it down. And it's ironic, since the end of the book focuses on our need to practice the art of doing nothing--and in doing what we do with an aware mind. I suspect that if the author were still alive, he would be pleased to know that I stopped my endless tasks and simply read. It is truly a book borne of human spirit and all that is good- love, compassion, understanding, faith. It is about looking at the "bad" and seeing it for what it is-- just part of life. It is funny-- I couldn't stop laughing at some of his jokes and observations. I won't spoil them for you but I hope you enjoy his joke about the turtle and the snail as much as I did. This book will make you laugh and make you cry-- that's a trite comment I know, but it's true. And, to continue my trite comments, I couldn't put it down. I hope you won't be able to either-- because that means it touched you like it did me. I know I will re-read it soon and I hope I remember to re-read it often. As the author would say (but not out loud for fear you might question his sanity) "Namaste."

Didn't finish

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