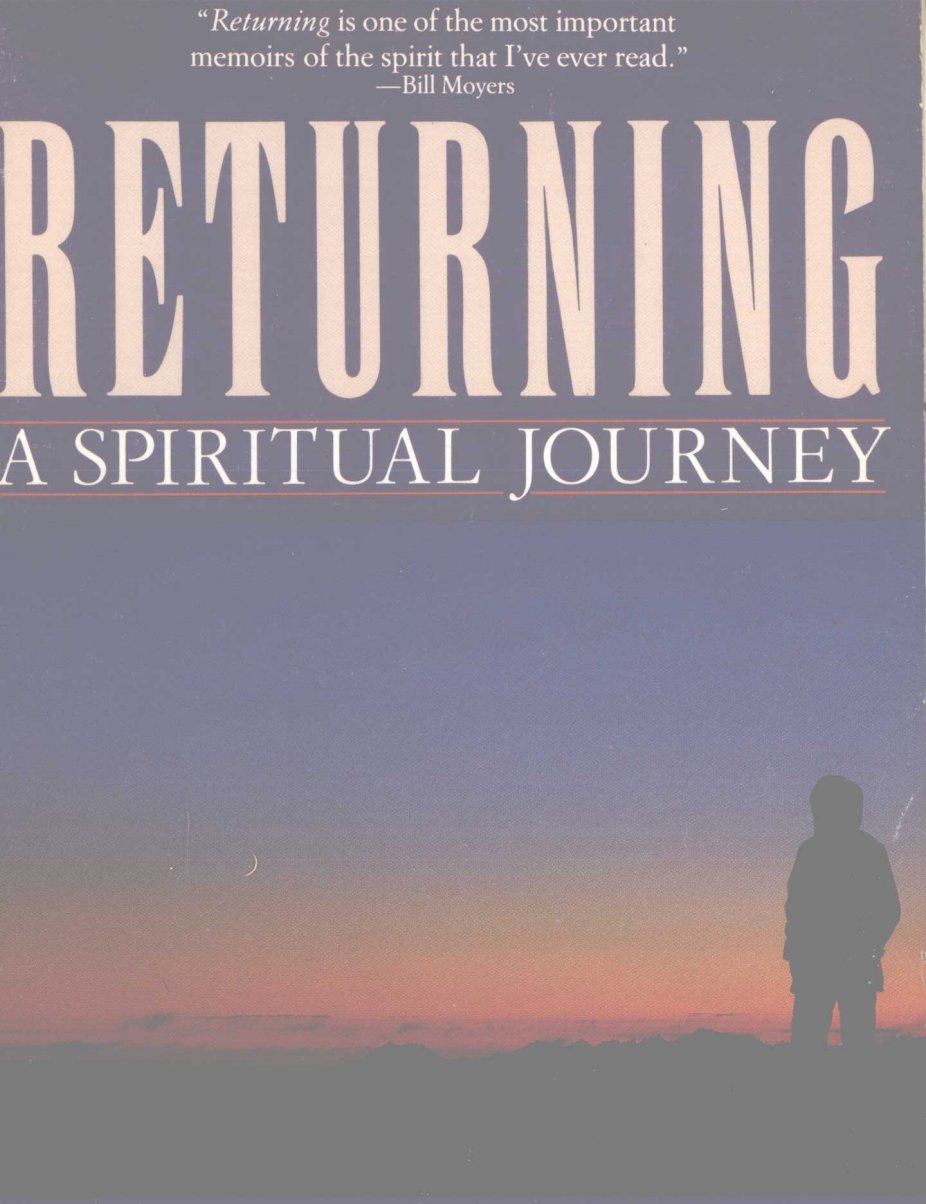
"*Returning* is one of the most important memoirs of the spirit that I've ever read."
—Bill Moyers

RETURNING

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



DAN WAKEFIELD

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by DAN WAKEFIELD

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Author's Preface

This book originated in the living room of the King's Chapel parish house in Boston, where a group of ten people sat around a table sharing their life experiences in a course on "religious autobiography" taught by the minister. It was there that for the first time I began to understand how my life could be viewed as a spiritual journey as well as a series of secular adventures of accomplishment and disappointment, personal and professional triumph and defeat. I started to see the deeper connections and more expansive framework offered by the sense of our small daily drama in relation to the higher meaning that many people call God.

Because of the intimacy and trust of that small group of people, I began to write of my earliest experiences of a spiritual nature in the most unguarded and open manner. When I later returned to pick up the thread of that narrative and expand it first into an article that appeared in the New York *Times Magazine* and then into this book, I continued to write in the same intimate tone when dealing with the most personal experiences of my life, whether sexual, psychological, or spiritual. It was not my purpose in doing so to shock anyone, or to gain some sort of absolution through literary confession, but rather to share with readers as I had with the people in that room in the parish house the deepest currents of my experience in the most honest and open way I knew how. To do less seemed a violation of the spirit of the enterprise, the effort to look as deeply as possible into the

self in order to try to connect as best we could, no matter how brokenly, with the very source of our being. In doing so, I felt that those of us at the parish house made a contribution not only to our own self-understanding but to that of one another. It is with this goal and on this level I hope to communicate with the readers of this book.

I think the attempt to see one's life in spiritual terms is increasingly of interest and value to people. I watched some of my fellow seekers in the class grow and change, and in deep and quiet ways experience the power of healing simply through becoming closer to the spiritual element in their lives. I was one of them. I recommend the experience and, with gratitude and humility, I offer you mine.

"We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to His influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. The universe, as those parts of it which our personal being constitutes, takes a turn genuinely for the worse or for the better in proportion as each one of us fulfills or evades God's demands. As far as this goes I probably have you with me, for I only translate into schematic language what I may call the instinctive belief of mankind: God is real since He produces real effects."

—William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

"I believe that humans are unable to live without some contact with what I call the third parent: God, or some culture growing up around a tradition of thinking about God or gods."

—George W. S. Trow, "The Third Parent,"
Harper's magazine, July 1987

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I

TURNING

One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my forty-eighth birthday, I woke up screaming. I got out of bed, went into the next room, sat down on a couch, and screamed again. This was not, in other words, one of those waking nightmares left over from sleep that is dispelled by the comforting light of day. It was, rather, a response to the reality that another morning had broken in a life I could only deal with sedated by wine, loud noise, moving images, and wired to electronic games that further distracted my fragmented attention from a growing sense of blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being, my most essential self. It was the beginning of a year in which I would have scored in the upper percentile of these popular magazine tests that list the greatest stresses of life: I left the house I owned, the city I was living in, the work I was doing, the woman I had lived with for seven years and had hoped to remain with the rest of my life, ran out of money, discovered I had endangered my health, and attended the funeral of my father in May and my mother in November.

The day I woke up screaming I grabbed from among my books an old Bible I hadn't opened for nearly a quarter of a century. With a desperate instinct I turned to the Twenty-third Psalm and read it over, several times, the words and the King James cadence bringing a sense of relief and comfort, a kind of emotional balm. In the coming chaotic days and months I some-

times recited that psalm over in my mind, and it always had that calming effect, but it did not give me any sense that I suddenly believed in God again. The psalm simply seemed an isolated source of solace and calm, such as any great poem might be.

In that first acute stage of my crisis I went to doctors for help, physical and mental. I told an internist in Beverly Hills that I had an odd feeling my heart was beating too fast and he confirmed my suspicion. My "resting" pulse rate was 120, and the top of the normal range is 100. An EKG showed there was nothing wrong with my heart, and the doctor asked if I was in the entertainment business. I confessed to television; I had been co-producer of a TV movie I wrote and so earned the title of "writer-producer," giving me the high Hollywood status of a "hyphenate." The doctor nodded and smiled, saying many of his patients in The Industry suffered from stress, as I evidently did now. He prescribed medication that would lower my racing pulse.

The "beta blockers" lowered my pulse but not my anxiety, and I explained to a highly recommended psychiatrist in nearby Westwood (home of UCLA) how I had come out to Los Angeles from Boston nearly three years before to write a TV series called "James at 15" that ran for a season, and then I stayed on doing TV movies and a feature film rewrite I was fired from. I told her how I had grown to feel alien and alienated in Los Angeles; the freeways and frantic pace and the roller coaster of show business were driving me nuts and I couldn't stand the sight of a palm tree. The psychiatrist said I should take a vacation; she suggested Santa Barbara. At that moment the voice of Bob Dylan wailed in my mind the line from "Just Like Tom Thumb Blues"—that my best friend the doctor won't even tell me what I got.

Watching the national weather forecast on "Good Morning, America," I pictured myself on the bottom left-hand corner of the map in the dot of Los Angeles and felt I had slid to the wrong hole on a giant pinball machine, wanting to tilt the whole

thing so I could get back to the upper right-hand corner to Boston, where I felt pulled by internal gravity. My Southern California disorientation deepened because I no longer knew when anything happened in the course of a year since all the seasons looked the same to me; when I saw a videotape of Henry James's *The Europeans* the New England autumn leaves and sunlight falling on plain board floors brought tears to my eyes.

I tried to forget about Hollywood by starting a new novel but the room I worked in was next to the swimming pool and the service people who came to test the chlorine were unemployed actors discussing casting calls, making it hard to concentrate; besides, the damp seeped into the pages and stiffened them, giving the manuscript the texture of corpse. I wondered if I might end up as one of those bodies in the movies of Hollywood who float face down in their own swimming pool.

A plumber who came to fix the toilet saw the typewriter and tried to pitch me an idea for a TV pilot about a jewel thief who gains access to rich people's houses by working as a plumber. When he asked if I wanted to get involved I wasn't sure if he meant in a criminal operation or a TV series and each seemed equally unappealing. I longed to leave the land of deals and palm trees and live in a building made of solid brick with a tree outside I could tell the time of year by. Finally, on one of those frantic mornings I stopped in the midst of all I was doing (and failing to do) and called American Airlines, booking a seat on the next flight to Boston.

The city itself was succor, a feast of familiar tradition from the statues of heroes (Alexander Hamilton, William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel Eliot Morison among them) in the wide swath of Commonwealth Avenue to the long wharves on the waterfront reaching out toward Europe. Walking the brick streets of my old neighborhood on Beacon Hill, I felt in balance again with the universe, and a further pull to what seemed the center of it,

the source of something I was searching for, something I couldn't name that went far beyond the satisfaction of scenery or local color. I headed like a homing pigeon to the pond in the Public Garden and, without having planned it, sat down on a bench, and at the same time that tears of gratitude came to my eyes the words of the psalm also came to my mind:

". . . he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul."

I recited the psalm from the start and at the end said "Amen" as if it were a prayer, and it was, of thanks. It would not have occurred to me to go to any church or chapel, but the pond in the Public Garden seemed precisely the place to have offered this.

I thought no further about "religion" on that trip but concerned myself with the more pressing problem of my physical health, which my Boston doctor told me he was frankly worried about. He too found I had a pulse rate of 120, a condition called tachycardia. The EKG showed no heart disease or damage ("yet," he added) but, unlike the internist in L.A., he prescribed not pills but a program of exercise and diet conducted at something called a Stress Lab at Massachusetts General Hospital. I went out of fear, grumbling all the way, wanting a chilled glass of dry white wine instead.

When I came back to Boston a month later, after finishing (or in some cases giving up or fleeing from) my business in Los Angeles, the last thing I wanted to do was return to that damned stress clinic and start their Exercycle program. The principal exercise I had been engaged in the past few years was carrying from the car to the house the case of Almaden chablis half gallons I bought every week as basic sustenance. I was in grief over the breakup of my seven-year relationship that had not survived my move back East from L.A., which was followed a week later by my father's death. The only way I knew how to ease the pain was by drowning it with alcohol, the same "cure" I'd been using for nearly a quarter of a century. I had not done

anything for my physical health since I left Boy Scout Camp Chank-tun-un-gi the summer of '48, and only some frayed, shrunken instinct for survival enabled me to make myself go back to see the Exercycle people.

I told Dr. Howard Hartley, the director of the Stress Lab, and the nurse who assisted him, Jane Sherwood, that I was going through a difficult time, I was drinking a lot of wine, and that I did not intend to stop or even cut down. I thought this might provoke them and get me out of the whole thing, but neither of them even blinked. Dr. Hartley was a quiet, thoughtful man about my own age with graying hair and my own sort of Midwestern accent, and Jane was an attractive young blond woman who seemed genuinely concerned about my health. They had disappointed my preconceptions (based on painful experience) about medical people as condescending martinets, and even my aggressive announcement about wine consumption failed to rattle them. Dr. Hartley said all they were asking me to do at that point was work out on the Exercycle a half hour every day, or at least three times a week. I gruffly said if I was going to do it at all I would do the damn thing every day.

I rode for dear life. I rode for my life when I wondered if trying to save it or keep it together was worth the effort. I rode in a fifth-floor walkup apartment I had sublet on Beacon Hill that stifling summer of 1980 in stuffy heat broken by sudden dark thunderstorms that crashed around me like the pieces of my life breaking apart. I rode on a BH Home Bike my old friend Shaun O'Connell helped me buy in some suburban mall sporting goods store and lugged up the stairs for me on a day I was so depressed that after assembling the bike, while I looked on in a sort of paralysis of will, he turned to me before leaving and said in the most optimistic summation of my situation he could muster: "Well, at least you're alive."

I rode watching "All My Children" on a portable black and white television set to see other people's problems in hopes of temporarily forgetting my own; I rode while reading Henri

Troyat's biography of Tolstoy and was cheered to learn that the author of *War and Peace* took up bicycle riding for his health at age sixty-seven (he read *Scientific Notes on the Action of the Velocipede as Physical Exercise* by L. K. Popov) and that he and his wife Sonya kept records of their pulse rates in their respective journals, especially noting the elevation after domestic arguments. ("After she left he felt his pulse . . . and noted 'Ninety.' ") I rode every day, as ritually as I guzzled my wine every night, and sometimes at lunch to help me make it through to "cocktail time." I rode on days when I didn't even want to get out of bed or get dressed, I rode when I couldn't yet begin the rewrite of the script I had to do to make enough money to pay the rent, I rode when I had a hangover and feared any exertion would make me sick. I rode because some vital if battered part of me wanted to survive, and more than that to live, and when everything else seemed illusory or elusive and out of my control, I knew there was one specific thing I could do to help myself, to keep going, and that was to ride the damned bike. I did it, each day, and nothing I had ever done felt quite so essential as gripping those handlebars and holding on.

There was consolation in being back not only in Boston but in my old neighborhood, the Hill; walking down the main drag of Charles Street, I knew how a soldier felt returning home from war. Old neighbors stopped to shake my hand, and merchants greeted me with welcome and asked what they could do to help me get settled again ("rehabilitated," I thought of it). Ed Jones, a bachelor I thought of as "King of the Hill," reintroduced me to the regulars at the bar of the Charles Restaurant, and it seemed a haven and shelter, comfortably friendly and dim.

That sodden summer was shot through with shafts of the most intense and unexpected joy, like the moment I came up out of the subway at Harvard Square to the strains of Bach being vigorously played in the foyer of the Coop for coins by street musicians with violins and cellos and it felt like being bathed with love; and the evening Joe Massik took us sailing out of

Boston Harbor and we watched the sun go down and the lights come on in the towers downtown like golden signals. Afterward we went to Brandy Pete's for huge platters of chicken and pasta and baskets of fresh bread, and I felt fed as well by friendship and fortune of place.

That fall I found an apartment up on Mt. Vernon Street with big bay windows that looked out on another brick building across the street and a tree, just as I'd dreamed of in Hollywood. I got out the novel whose pages were still stiff from the damp of my poolside studio—it felt like something exhumed—and set to work, with the Hill serving not only as home but as inspiration. I could see a slice of the Boston Common from the window I faced when I worked, and as the late autumn sky above it turned the cold royal purple and silver-gray colors I remembered and loved, I told myself I had to finish the book to earn the money—the privilege—of staying on and living here. The Hill was family, too. When my mother died in early November Ed Jones gathered friends from the neighborhood who mourned with me; he made a stew and we drank and dined, and I was comforted. They drove me to the airport and met me when I returned. Home.

Just by moving back to Boston my pulse went down from 120 to 100, and after faithfully riding the Exercycle for three months it was down to the eighties. I was elated by actually making an improvement in my physical condition for the first time in my life, an accomplishment that prompted me to tell Dr. Hartley I'd be willing to try the diet he recommended (a high-complex-carbohydrate regime with no oil, butter, or fat, similar to but not as strict and restrictive as the Pritikin diet). I would try it with the proviso, of course, that I could still drink all the wine I wanted. They told me to do the best I could. In another three months I had lost eighteen pounds and felt almost as miraculously lean as my idol Paul Newman in *The Hustler.*

My faith in Dr. Hartley and Jane Sherwood was now so awesome that they could have asked me to do the impossible, and