

Back from the Dead

By Bill Walton

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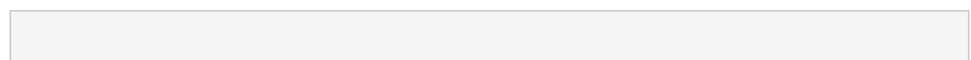
This inspiring memoir from sports and cultural icon Bill Walton recounts his devastating injuries and amazing recoveries, set in the context of his UCLA triumphs under John Wooden, his storied NBA career, and his affinity for music and the Grateful Dead.

In February 2008, Bill Walton suffered a catastrophic spinal collapse—the culmination of a lifetime of injuries—that left him unable to move. He spent three years on the floor of his house, eating his meals there and crawling to the bathroom, where he could barely hoist himself up onto the toilet. The excruciating pain and slow recovery tested Walton to the fullest. But with extraordinary patience, fortitude, determination, and sacrifice—and pioneering surgery—he recovered, and now shares his life story in this remarkable and unique memoir.

Walton grew up in San Diego in the 1950s and 1960s and was deeply influenced by the political and cultural upheavals of that period. Although he strongly identified with the cool people, particularly in music and politics, his greatest role model outside his family was super-straight UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, a thoughtful, rigorous mentor who seemed immune to the turmoil of the times. Although there was always tension and conflict between them, the two men would speak nearly every day for forty-three years, until Wooden's death at age ninety-nine.

Despite a lifelong stuttering affliction, Walton chose a career in broadcasting after his playing days ended. He eventually won an Emmy Award and other accolades for broadcasting and was recognized as a leading media pundit.

John Wooden once said that no greatness ever came without sacrifice. Nothing better illustrates this saying than the real story of Walton's life. In his own words, *Back from the Dead* shares this dramatic story, including his basketball and broadcasting careers, his many setbacks and rebounds, and his ultimate triumph as the toughest of champions.



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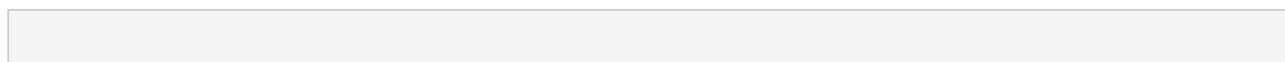
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Back from the Dead By Bill Walton Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

“Bill Walton won at every level with extraordinary skill and intelligence. Yet more importantly, he continues to win in the game of life.” (Bill Russell, Bill Walton’s favorite player ever)

“Elegaic yet exuberant. . . . A celebration of a life in sports that is also a frank assessment of the toll basketball took on his body. . . . [Walton] writes with admirable candor.” (John Swansburg *The New York Times Book Review*)

“A remarkable journey of resilience, reinvention and ultimate triumph told in the unique voice of one of the great pundits—and players—of our generation.” (David J. Stern, NBA Commissioner Emeritus)

“This isn’t a basketball story, it’s a story of victory over adversity and the Tao of positive thinking. Quitters never win and winners never quit. Bill Walton is a winner.” (Mickey Hart, Drummer/Percussionist, Grateful Dead)

“Bill Walton played the game of life with the same verve as he did the game of basketball, even in the face of crippling injuries and withering pain. Funny, poignant and inspiring, *Back from the Dead* is a rollicking, riveting memoir, told with characteristic honesty by one of America’s most compelling personalities.” (David Axelrod, Author of BELIEVER: My Forty Years in Politics)

“Larger than life, with a heart and soul to match his reach and accomplishments, Bill Walton has written a compelling autobiography, *Back from the Dead*. This is Walton at his best, a great friend who helps you overcome even the most brutal setback.” (Roger McNamee, tech investor, musician, Deadhead)

“Walton adroitly weaves his personal and professional lives in this frequently stirring memoir. . . . [His] love for life and the people and things in it—including his college coach, John Wooden—is infectious. You can’t stop reading, or rooting for the man.” (*Publishers Weekly*)

“Fervent, witty. . . . One of the NBA’s 50 greatest players scores another basket—a deeply personal one.” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

About the Author

Bill Walton was NCAA player of the year at UCLA from 1972 to 1974, when UCLA set an NCAA record eighty-eight consecutive-game winning streak. A former NBA Champion and MVP, he was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame and selected as one of the NBA’s Fifty Greatest Players ever. He has also had a successful award-winning broadcasting career with ABC, ESPN, NBC, MSNBC, CBS, Turner, and Fox, among others. He currently resides in his hometown of San Diego with his family. Visit him at BillWalton.com.

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Back from the Dead

CHAPTER 1



One Way or Another This Darkness Got to Give



Summer 2009, San Diego

I can't do this anymore. It's just too hard. It hurts too much. Why should I continue? What's the point in going on? I have been down so long now, I have no idea which way anywhere is anymore. There's no reason to believe that tomorrow is going to be any better.

If I had a gun, I would use it.

The light has gone out of my life, and there's no sound, either. Not even in my spirit and soul, where at least there has always been music.

I have been living on the floor for most of the last two and a half years, unable to move, unable to get up. I've cut myself off from Jerry, Bob, Neil, and the rest, just as I've disconnected from most everybody and everything else. The only people I see, talk to, or hear from are the few who refuse to leave me alone—my wife, Lori; my brother Bruce; our four sons; the most obstinate of my closest friends, like Andy Hill, Jim Gray, my guys in the Grateful Dead—and the one person I refuse to leave alone, John Wooden, now almost one hundred years old. Everybody else has been turned away. My mom doesn't even know about any of this. She only gets the good news.

Lori always says my mind is like a slot machine: you never know how the spinning wheels are going to align.

The wheel is turning and you can't slow down,

You can't let go, and you can't hold on,

You can't go back, and you can't stand still,

If the thunder don't get you, then the lightning will.

I've lived with pain for most of my life, but pain has never been my entire life. It's in my spine now, and radiating everywhere from it. It has taken me down like never before. And it just won't let me be.

What to some is pain, to me is really just fatigue. I love and live for that fatigue and the soreness that comes with it, when you've pushed yourself relentlessly up and over another long, hard climb—the longer and harder the better—and met the toughest challenges imaginable, fighting against gravity and exhaustion, even when one more push seems impossible, until you reach the top, and the destination of euphoria, and you throw your arms over your head in a wild explosion of ecstasy and celebration—a high-altitude climax that you're sure will last forever. There is nothing like it.

But this time is different—real different.

I was inspired early on by George Bernard Shaw, who challenged us all, as we approach the scrap heap of life, to become “a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

That’s the way it has always gone for me, as a young boy growing up in San Diego, chasing my basketball dreams at UCLA, then Portland, with my hometown Clippers, and finally in Boston. It was more of the same later on, out on the broadcasting and business road for more than twenty years. It’s why I’ve gone to more than 859 Grateful Dead shows. It’s really all been one show that never ends. It’s also why, when I’m not at a Dead show, or not involved with basketball or business, I am at my happiest and best when riding high, up on my bike, dripping and soaking with sweat under the hot, burning sun, turning the crank and pushing the wheel endlessly over, time after time after time. Mile after countless mile across the warm, dry desert, along the twisting, jagged coast, or winding up a mountain, spinning, twirling, rolling, drifting, dreaming, celebrating—the chance of being on yet another long, hard climb, the longer and harder the better.

I can’t count the number of these long, hard climbs I’ve made over the years. But I do know that while the longest and hardest have taken me the highest, I never was able to get that euphoria to last very long. Every time, way too soon after I’d reached the top—so tantalizingly close to perfection—the dancing, dreaming, and celebrating that I was sure would never end would come to a crashing halt. Somehow, some way, my wheels would stop turning; I’d lose control and wind up skidding or skulking off the road, collapsing into a crumpled, helpless, hopeless heap—where everything would end up broken.

But with every inevitable catastrophic collapse, at least I always had the music—the one thing that never stopped. The songs, the stories, the dreams, the hope, would always get me through.

I realized at a very early age that all the songs of my heroes were really just songs of my own. And that they were written for me, to me, about me, and about everything that happened in my life. Somehow, some way, they all knew. About everything. The Dead, Dylan, Neil, the Johns—Lennon and Fogerty—Crosby, Stills & Nash, the Stones, Carlos, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, Jimmy Cliff, Jackson Browne, and ultimately the Eagles and Bruce Springsteen.

It fell apart, and it breaks my heart to think about how close we came.

So close, so many times. It all could have been so perfect but for the fiery crash that would ruin everything, every time. UCLA and the 88-game winning streak that should have been a perfect 105—what could and should have been, ultimately ending in disappointment, shame, and embarrassment. The Trail Blazers, Clippers, Celtics—more of the same. It all could have been so right; it all should have been so perfect.

When life looks like Easy Street, there is danger at your door.

It’s never a good idea, Coach Wooden preached, to measure yourself by what you have done rather than by what you could or should have been able to do.

But at least my crashes—painful, miserable, and frequent as they were—always eventually led to new beginnings and the next long, hard climb. And on each new climb, I had to try to remember to learn perspective, relativity, patience, and tolerance, and remind myself of the fragility of it all. You’d think I would know by now. But the pattern kept repeating. Each new challenge filled me with new confidence that this time would be different. And that the joys of this long, hard climb would finally last forever.

Coach Wooden was presciently brilliant on so many fronts. Sadly it took me too long to realize it. When I played for him, I was a teenager—seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. Most of what he said in those days seemed ridiculous. He would constantly remind me then, and continue to tell me over the next four decades, “Walton, you are the slowest learner I have ever had!”

Coach Wooden was an English teacher by profession; he had young men under his athletic supervision in the afternoon. Coach was charged by his father, Joshua, to “make each day your masterpiece.” Coach dutifully passed that wisdom on to all of his students. For his certificate of currency, relevancy, and authenticity, he wrote his master’s thesis on how to teach poetry. And while Coach had his poets—Shakespeare, Tennyson, Frost, Longfellow, Whitman, Dailey—I have mine: Jerry Garcia, John Lennon, Neil Young, Bob Dylan. Maybe if Coach had listened more closely, he would have realized that my guys were singing the same songs as his. I’m sure he felt the same way about me—listening more closely and all.

These days, it feels like none of them are singing anymore at all—Coach’s masters or mine. The music has finally, unexpectedly, tragically, totally stopped. I am buried too far down. It’s just too dark down here. And the climb is finally too long and too darn hard.

By the numbers, I am the most injured athlete in the history of sports. My injuries are not the gravest, but they are mine. They never go away. Sadly, they are the kinds of injuries that no one could see happen or ultimately understand—the way the world witnessed Joe Theismann’s leg snapping like a twig, endlessly replayed on TV.

And while I am a fighter and a player in the game of life, I am not much more than that. The true champions and heroes in our world are the freedom fighters struggling for truth and justice, the ones who through the ages gave up everything—their limbs, their minds, their freedom, their lives—so that all of us could have a chance to chase our dreams.

For me, the dream has too often devolved into the nightmare of endlessly repetitive and constant pain, agony, and guilt. Thirty-seven orthopedic surgeries, nearly all stemming from my malformed feet—my faulty foundation, which led to the endless string of stress fractures, which ultimately brought on the whole mess I’m in now. The insidious, ever-widening fractures in my feet, made so much worse by the fact that they were undetectable, even by machines, so that practically everyone had doubts that they ever even really existed. Confusing and confounding doubts that even consumed me.

The band was packed and gone

Were they ever even here at all?

I was born with structural, congenital defects in my feet, something that I learned way too late in life. My feet were not built to last—or to play basketball. My skeletal, structural foundation—inflexible and rigid—could not absorb the endless stress and impact of running, jumping, turning, twisting, and pounding for twenty-six years. Those fractures, tiny at first, were buried deep inside the bones, breaking from the inside out. Those bones in my feet and legs would ultimately fail just from playing the game I lived and loved, forced apart like earth’s tectonic plates, scraping and torqueing along a fault line.

I eventually ground my lower extremities down to dust.

As each long, hard climb became more impossibly difficult, the pain that I always thought was just part of life and the price of commitment and perfection would ultimately send me limping off the road into that

miserable, useless scrap heap.

Yes, the external pressures on me to play—when the crippling pain in my feet would tell me to stop—were enormous and very real. But ultimately the fault was mine. I was too weak to stand up for myself.

Won't you try just a little bit harder? Couldn't you try just a little bit more? . . .

Tryin' to get just a little bit farther than you've gone before.

Chasing my dreams was devolving into the deteriorating state of tormented conflict that has come to define my life.

I grew up in San Diego. It was perfect. My life was wonderful—great families; excellent schools, teachers, and coaches; it was sunny and eighty degrees every day. I assumed it was the same everywhere, for everyone.

Cursed with my bad feet and a lifelong speech impediment, I grew up thinking that everybody's feet hurt all the time and that only the lucky ones were able to talk. I was twenty-one before it ever occurred to me that there might be people who didn't have my best interests at heart.

And then I joined the NBA.

I was totally unprepared for a professional life outside the shelter of my family, my friends, my teachers, my coaches, and California. My parents loved me more than they cared about themselves. They taught my two brothers, my sister, and me to speak up and out, and to take action to make things better and right. It never crossed my mind that this could ever lead to problems.

Both my parents were college graduates and professionals. My dad was a social worker, adult educator, and music teacher; my mom was our town's librarian. I was a top student. I loved school. But because of my profound, limiting, and shamefully embarrassing stuttering problem, I learned to live and love life by myself. I loved to read, study history, write, and immerse my spirit and soul in all kinds of music. For the longest time we didn't have a TV, couldn't afford one. When finally we saved up enough money to buy one, my mom, who was in charge of the finances, declared under relentless pressure from the children that while we did now have enough money to buy a TV, she had done extensive research at the library and determined that there was nothing on TV worth watching—so we weren't going to get one.

When I was twelve I discovered, at a friend's house, that basketball was on TV. With that revelation came the staggering conclusion that my mom was not right about everything.

I had started playing basketball when I was eight and immediately fell in love with it because of my first coach, Rocky—our local fireman. When I was ten, I discovered the Lakers and the NBA on the radio, brought to life by Chick Hearn. Rocky and Chick were God to me. They defined my reality, creating a world that was not only fun but incredibly exciting. They had the ability to paint a masterpiece every night. And they delivered.

Basketball is the most perfect of all games. All you have to do is wait for the opening tip; then it's, Who's got a game? Who's in shape? Who can play? Who really wants this? It also allows someone who might be less naturally gifted than another to always have the chance to win, by outthinking and working smarter than the other guy, especially if teamed with equally smart, dedicated, and determined dreamers.

Rocky ultimately turned out to be my best coach. Rocky—like John Wooden, Denny Crum, Lenny Wilkens, Jack Ramsay, Gene Shue, Paul Silas, Don Chaney, K. C. Jones, and Red Auerbach—never really coached basketball. They all coached life. I learned early on that basketball was life, and that every possession of the ball provided unlimited opportunities to make a powerful, positive impact and contribution to our goal, a realization that I try to apply to everything I do in my life.

In basketball—like life—if your team is well coached, well conditioned, reasonably intelligent, and totally determined to make a positive, consistent contribution, you just might be able to find a way to beat anybody, maybe everybody. Or at least to have the chance to succeed on any long, hard climb.

Despite my bad feet and cursed speech, things were going fine for me until I was fourteen. I was 6'1", maybe 110 pounds, and playing basketball every minute that I could. Then one day in the summer of '67, down at the Helix High gym, I was playing against some really old guys—they must have been in their thirties. I was having a big day, just torching them, and they didn't like it. So they took me down with a high-low, tearing up my left knee. They stood over me, laughing.

Bob Dylan wrote: "When I was down, you just stood there grinning."

After a few months of rest and rehabilitation during which my knee didn't get any better, I was wheeled into surgery in the early fall for my first operation. I was fourteen years old. Afterward the doctor told me, "We don't know how this is going to play out, Billy. Just go home and lie down for a few months and we'll hope and pray for the best."

Things were never the same again. I dutifully went to bed, and when I got up three months later I was six and a half inches taller—but only five pounds heavier. My parents were aghast; none of my clothes fit anymore. But my coach, now Gordon Nash, was ecstatic.

I loved basketball from the very beginning—because of Rocky, because of the nature of the game, the speed, strategy, execution, repetition, running, jumping, and sweating. And I really loved the results—like winning.

In my first varsity season as a Helix junior in 1968–69, we won our last sixteen games. The next time my team lost was about five and a half years later, midway through my senior season at UCLA.

I lived to play on winning teams. At UCLA, I was All-America, Academic All-America, and College Player of the Year three times each. In the NBA, I was the league's No. 1 draft pick, its Most Valuable Player, was part of two championship teams, NBA Finals MVP, NBA Sixth Man of the Year, and was named to the NBA's All Time Team as one of the 50 Greatest Players in NBA History. I got to know and work with some of the most important people of the second half of the twentieth century. I've had the greatest adventures and lived the most wonderful life imaginable. But I also carry the burdens of my failures—every day.

Just as there was a stretch over six seasons when I didn't play in a losing game, there were another six seasons over which I could hardly play in any games at all. I am responsible for the failure of my hometown Clippers to succeed in San Diego. I was an NBA player for fourteen seasons, but when you add up all the games I could not play because of injuries—mostly those disastrously frustrating foot fractures that so many fans, reporters, announcers, coaches, cheerleaders, teammates, team owners, trainers, league officials, team doctors, and even I at times thought were imaginary—I missed the equivalent of nine and a half of those fourteen seasons. That I let down so many people because of injuries that no one could see caused me incredible pain and despair that was almost as overwhelming as the pain I'm feeling now.

On May 10, 1993, the night I was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, it all came full circle. I was part of the Hall of Fame class that includes Julius Erving, Calvin Murphy, Ann Meyers, Walt Bellamy, Dan Issel, Dick McGuire, and Uljana Semjonova (the 7' Latvian woman who played eighteen years without losing a game in international competition). Each of us was asked to speak for five minutes, and I went last, at the bottom of the alphabet. By this time in my life, I had learned to speak a little bit—another long, hard climb—and as my remarks passed the sixteen-minute mark of my allotted five, Brian McIntyre, monitoring the proceedings on behalf of the NBA, stood up and interrupted me midsentence, yelling, “Come on, Walton, let’s wrap this thing up! Your speech is lasting longer than your career did!”

People who suffer learn to laugh about their sadness in public. But in retrospect today, I understand now that I let down every team I ever played on. It’s hard not to think of those moments that could have been.

On the night Coach Wooden was honored as the greatest coach in the history of the world—not simply the greatest college coach, not merely the greatest basketball coach, but the greatest of all coaches in all sports for all time—Wooden, then ninety-nine years old, wrapped up his speech, the last of his life, by saying, “Finally, I want to say that I’m sorry to each and every one of you. I am sorry that I wasn’t able to do more to help you.”

While Wooden was and is my coach, Bill Russell is my hero, my favorite player ever—on and off the court—and the greatest winner in the history of sports. His college teams won back-to-back championships, and his Boston Celtics won eleven NBA championships in thirteen seasons. And yet, Russell only wants to talk about the two years he didn’t win. One of the reasons he is my hero is that for Bill Russell, success is limited by the things that don’t get done.

My failures lurk in the dates that have become daggers to my heart: January 7, January 19, and March 23, 1974; April 21, 1978; September 27, 1979; June 14, 1987; February 1, 1990.

And then in late February 2008—the day my spine collapsed and failed. The day I staggered down into this crumpled, wretched heap on the floor from which I no longer have the strength or the will to get up.

All the things I planned to do but did only halfway.

I live to be part of a special team, which is why my forty-three-year relationship with Coach Wooden was so perfect, despite the fact that when we first came together at UCLA in 1970—he was sixty-one and I just seventeen—we saw things so differently. Everything but basketball. In what was then the most serious contest under way in America, the Battle for the Soul and Future of our Country, we had opposite views on almost every subject, from the length of my hair to my lifestyle, politics, and choice of friends to my idea of writing a letter to President Nixon demanding he resign—on Coach Wooden’s personal stationery. I made Coach’s life miserable. And here at the end, he’s the one saying he’s sorry.

Life puts you on all sorts of teams, in all sorts of games. One of the best teams that I got to be part of never lost a game, and came the closest of all to reaching that endless and perfect wave that stretches to eternity. But it sadly did end for Jerry Garcia in 1995, and it has ended now for me. The music of the Grateful Dead that ran through my head nonstop for more than forty years has inexplicably now stopped. I am desperate, empty of hope, empty of dreams, empty of everything. I live—if you can call it life—on the floor, and I can’t take it anymore.

My spine will no longer hold me. After spending more than forty years on the road—half as a player, half as a broadcaster, all as a proud Dead Head, logging two hundred nights and often six hundred thousand air

miles each and every year—I can't go anymore. I can't get up off the floor.

The pain I'm feeling now is worse than anything I could have ever imagined. Unrelenting, debilitating, and excruciating—the pain has destroyed me. Imagine being submerged in a vat of scalding acid with an electric current running constantly through it. A burning, stinging, pulsating, punishing pain that you can never escape. Ever.

There are times when I'm lying here—with nothing. Lori, the most beautiful and wonderful of angels, as fine as anything's fine, comes to me. As she gets ever closer, it is just too much. And I cry out, in whimpering pain, "STOP. Don't come any closer. YOU'RE PUSHING THE AIR ONTO ME! It's too much. STOP!!!"

My life is over. I can do nothing. I eat my meals stretched out prone on the floor. I have to crawl like a snake to the bathroom, and use all my strength to climb up to the toilet. I don't think I am going to make it. I tell Lori that it's time for her to go, to get out while the getting is good.

Not wanting to leave her with a big mess, we've put our longtime family home—the dream of a lifetime for the past thirty-six years—up for sale and moved into the small cottage next door. I can't think. I can't sleep, except when my neighbor Danny comes over and starts explaining his insurance company workers' comp legal defense work, which puts me straight out, but only for a moment.

One day I am on the floor, as always, and Lori has just put some food down in front of me, so that I can slurp something in. I hear the front door open at the other end of the house and know it's our youngest son, Chris, dropping in for a visit with his new dog, Cortez, a huge, rambunctious bullmastiff that must weigh three or four hundred pounds, and is still just a puppy. I can hear Chris release Cortez, and the giant, panting beast begins to roam. On the prowl, Cortez comes around a corner and wanders over to where I am lying facedown on the floor and stares at me, transfixed, as I try to nibble or slurp some food off the plate, just inches in front of my mouth. The giant dog looks at the meal in front of my face, marches right up to it, and wolfs down every morsel in a single bite—and there is nothing I can do about it.

Cortez turns to leave, and as he rounds the corner, he belches and passes gas, never looking back. It is the lowest point imaginable.

I've run the gamut from thinking I am going to die to wanting to die to the worst of all possible places—being afraid that I am going to live—and this is what I am going to be stuck with. I have given up. I am standing on the edge of a bridge, measuring, knowing full well that it would be better to jump than to go back to what is left of my life. It is time to go.

Knocked down—it gets to wearing thin,

They just won't let you be.

Two and a half years I have spent on the floor. When I was at my lowest, I was fired from my broadcasting job—right in the middle of Lori's birthday party. I didn't have the heart to tell her for several days. There went our income, our health insurance, my dignity, my self-respect. We would lose our home.

Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard could have written a song.

I no longer have the strength to fight back. The mind-numbing, spirit-sapping, life-draining drugs they tell me are supposed to help eventually just become more of what I desperately need to get away from. If only

this were a game and I could look to Maurice Lucas, my greatest teammate, the strongest, gentlest, and toughest friend anybody could ever ask for, who, anytime anything needed to be done—move somebody out of the way, punch someone in the face—would stand tall and convincingly say, “I’ll take care of this.” But Maurice can’t help here—he’s dying of cancer himself. Where is Larry Bird to shoot us out of trouble, now that the game is really on the line? What can Coach Wooden tell me now? Where is the band? Please, Jerry, just one more time—take me safely home.

Turn on your light, let it shine on me.

But there is no light at all now, and no sound, either, not even in my mind. It is all so terribly dark. The music has been gone for months, years now. If only I could float and bathe, one more time, in the Dead’s flesh-eating, low-end beam, maybe it could breathe life into me—one more time.

The music has stopped. The pain digs in ever deeper and devours more and more of me for days, weeks, months, years—with no end in sight. Only I can end this.

I ask Lori to drive me to my beloved Balboa Park, where my glorious childhood memories live—of picnic dinners with our family, of running wild through the playgrounds with my brothers and sister, of one day discovering magical Muni Gym, my personal Shangri-la where endless games of pickup basketball changed and made my life.

I struggle to pull myself out of the car and take a few agonizing steps along the beautifully ancient Cabrillo Bridge, which spans the park and the freeway, hundreds of feet below. I stand, peer, and ponder.

Later I hear a friend on my voice mail: “Hey, Bill—I was driving to work this morning and I saw you standing on the bridge. I was going to yell ‘Don’t jump!’ but I didn’t want to scare you. It was great to see you out in the sunshine, though!”

Comes a time, when the blind man takes your hand,

Says: Don’t you see? Got to make it somehow, on the dreams you still believe

Don’t give it up, you’ve got an empty cup, only love can fill.

I have lost everything, the last possession being the will to live.

But then. Just before the final fade-out . . .

I know I don’t control it, but somewhere deep inside, there is still a faint spirit fighting for life, for the light, trying to escape the darkness and evil that is strangling me. I try to reach one last time for some strength to give this fighting spirit some room to move, to breathe, but it’s harder and requires more of everything than I’ve ever given to anything in my life.

I can’t do it alone. I need help to push through the pain and the sadness. I need Maurice with all his strength to clear the space and pull me through. I keep working and searching and fighting, calling for help from everyone I’ve encountered along the road—from my family and friends, from my teammates, my heroes, my teachers and coaches—searching to find that way out . . . and back.

The effort exhausts me, and I am ready to give it all up when I begin to sense something. It’s more than just

the dull, numb, lifeless, joyless pulse I've had now for all these interminable months. Something is swelling up and bulging out from the depths.

Did you hear what I just heard? There seems to be a beat now,

I can feel it in my feet now, listen, here it comes again!

I can't believe it, but I'm faintly hearing a beat. And slowly that beat is getting stronger and louder. And now there is energy and a current of electricity. Now a vamp. A rising tide of anticipation. More sound and more tension, turning into a rhythm, about to become a frenzy. And now I can feel it.

The fans are on their feet. They know what's coming next.

And then . . .

The band is starting up again! The music plays, the wheel begins to turn again, and to my complete astonishment, the total darkness of death and the fog of despair are beginning to lift. Can I really hold on? Is there a chance I can take more trips, make an impact, play in the game of life one more time?

Every time that wheel turns around, bound to cover just a little more ground. . . .

Round, round, robin run round, got to get back where you belong.

Could it be that Coach Wooden's slowest learner ever has finally figured out a way to make that last long, hard climb—one more time? The one that will take me all the way to heaven?

Old man, take a look at my life, I'm a lot like you were.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marian Sheffield:

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Phillis Ries:

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