



KERRY ST. OURS

Keep The Hand Moving
Natalie Goldberg On Zen And The Art Of Writing Practice

GENIE ZEIGER

Natalie Goldberg's first book, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (*Shambhala*), was a surprise hit when it was published in 1986. The first print run was ten thousand copies. In the past seventeen years it has sold more than a million copies in ten languages and is now in its thirty-third printing. Looking back, Goldberg says, "I'm a little embarrassed by the confidence of that thirty-six-year-old. I just told people what to do. Now I would say, 'You have to find your own way.'"

What Goldberg told people to do was to make writing a practice in the way that meditation is a practice. "You have to pick up a pen and write regularly for specific periods of time," she instructs, and put into words what you most need to say. The product, Goldberg contends, is not as important as the process. Ultimately, she says, writing is "a way to help you penetrate your life and become sane."

Since *Bones*, as she calls it, she has written six more books, including *Thunder and Lightning* (Bantam), a follow-up to her first. Her most recent book is *Top of My Lungs* (Overlook Press), a collection of paintings and poems.

Goldberg grew up on Long Island, New York, and spent twelve years studying with Zen teacher Katagiri Roshi in Minnesota. She began writing and painting soon after beginning her Zen studies. "It was like spontaneous combustion," she says. For the past seventeen years, she has lived in Taos, New Mexico, where she leads weeklong writing workshops and retreats. "We do a week of silence with sitting, walking, and writing," she says. "It's really like a Zen retreat, with the addition of timed writing periods."

The magic of her method is the belief that anyone can write, that everyone has a voice and something to say. She advises writers to meet a friend for a "writing date" — a pleasant contradiction to the stereotype of the solitary, tortured writer. Through her writing and teaching, Goldberg has changed many writers' idea of success. More important than getting published, she says, is finding satisfaction in the regular practice of writing.

When I tried to imagine Goldberg prior to this interview, I saw her sitting in a Southwest cafe, pen in hand, a wristwatch on the small round table in front of her. We met instead at the Mabel Dodge Luhan House in Taos, where she leads writing and meditation workshops. Built by an heiress who had an art salon in New York City, the house has been temporary residence to many artists and writers over the years, including Georgia O'Keeffe, D.H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams, Willa Cather, and Carl Jung. The house's boldly colored second-story windows, Goldberg told me, were painted by D.H. Lawrence for privacy in the bathroom. A lithe, vibrant, plainly dressed woman in her midfifties, Goldberg has a New York accent, which immediately endeared her to me, a former New Yorker. Her manner was warm, direct, funny, and extremely focused.

Zeiger: How has the geography of the Southwest affected your writing practice?



NATALIE GOLDBERG

Goldberg: People have this dream of writing in the gorgeous mountains of Taos, but I say, "Just write wherever you are." I love the land, and it's important to me, and I think it's essential to integrate where you live into your writing, but I don't have any romantic notions about Southwest geography. Wherever you are is good enough.

I just came back from a year and a half in St. Paul, Minnesota, and writing was easier there because they have lots of cafes, and it was gray and rainy, and there was nothing to do but work. Here in Taos you want to day-dream a lot, because the beautiful landscape takes you away.

Zeiger: What does a writing practice involve? What are its goals?

Goldberg: A writing practice is simply picking up a pen — a fast-writing pen, preferably, since the mind is faster than the hand — and doing timed writing exercises. The idea is to keep your hand moving for, say, ten minutes, and don't cross anything out, because that makes space for your inner editor to come in. You are free to write the worst junk in America. After all, when we get on the tennis courts, we don't expect to be a champion the first day. But somehow with writing, if we don't write the opening paragraph of *War and Peace* the first time we sit down with our notebook, we feel we've failed.

You can use a computer, but I always say you should be able to write with a pen, because someday your computer might break, or you might not have access to electricity. It's sort of like driving: you still have to know how to walk.

I consider writing an athletic activity: the more you practice, the better you get at it. The reason you keep your hand moving is because there's often a conflict between the editor and the creator. The editor is always on our shoulder saying, "Oh, you shouldn't write that. It's no good." But when you have to keep the hand moving, it's an opportunity for the creator to have a say. All the other rules of writing practice support that primary rule of keeping your hand moving. The goal is to allow the written word to connect with your original mind, to write down the first thought you flash on, before the second and third thoughts come in.

Zeiger: Why?

Goldberg: Because that's where the energy is. That's where the alive, fresh vision is, before society, which we've internalized, takes over and teaches us to be polite and censor ourselves. Another way of putting it is that you need to trust what intuitively comes through you, rather than what you think you should be writing. What comes through you arises from a much larger place than that of the editor, the critic, or society.

Zeiger: What is that place, and how does it differ from the traditional view of the muse?

Goldberg: I call that place "wild mind." Wild mind isn't just your mind; it's the whole world moving through you. With it, you give voice to a very large life, even though you might

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only be talking about your grandmother's closet with its particular wallpaper and floor. It's an awareness of everything through one thing.

When we think of the muse visiting, we think of something coming down from on high and helping us. Wild mind is available to everyone; you don't have to seduce it to get it to come to you. When I think of wild mind, I think, *Big sky*. Usually we put a black dot in the sky and pay attention to just that dot: *I don't like myself*, or *I'm unhappy*. With wild mind, you live with the whole sky. It's very different from the idea of a muse, which is something outside yourself that appears and magically helps you.

Zeiger: What about great writers who never meditated or had a writing practice? How did they get in touch with wild mind?

Goldberg: I think the great writers who never did formal meditation were meditating through their art: really concentrating, being present, examining their own minds. That's why I love literature: it's the place where I discovered wild mind in Western culture.

Zeiger: Is getting in touch with wild mind therapeutic?

Goldberg: It is if you see the goal of therapy as more than simply functioning better in the world. Wild mind does make you feel better, because it's a release. It is also a way to become more alive. If therapy is about becoming alive, then, yes, that's what it's about.

Zeiger: Do you believe that writing practice makes one a better writer?

Goldberg: I do, because you are drawing on a much larger energy force, and so the possibilities are much greater. There's a difference, though, between writing as practice and writing as art: Writing as practice is an acceptance of your whole mind and whatever comes through you, moment by moment. Writing as art is taking what comes through you and directing it. Writing practice is the whole ocean, but when you're creating art, you dig a canal and direct the force of the water in a particular way.

Zeiger: In a practical sense, does that mean looking through your pages of free writing and selecting parts that

you might want to craft?

Goldberg: That's one thing. Also, writing practice teaches you what your obsessions are, what you keep coming back to. Your obsessions have energy, and you can use them. Writing offers you a chance to transform an obsession into a passion, which is a lot better than constantly focusing on the things that are eating you.

Zeiger: Where does the imagination come in?

Goldberg: Funny, but I don't think about the imagination. I never even use that word. Instead of *imagination*, I think of my life, my memory, my feelings. *Imagination* is so overused it's become a dead word in our society.

Zeiger: When I'm writing at my best, I feel as though the words come through me; I don't create them. How does this tie in to what we're talking about?

Goldberg: What you're describing is contacting wild mind, and wild mind is not Genie. It's not your little self. It's the whole world coming through you, including our collective memories, our collective past. You see, there's a part of us that is always awake, that takes in everything and remembers it. Our job as writers is to connect with that awake part of ourselves.

Zeiger: Not everyone understands what Zen is. Could you define it for us?

Goldberg: Zen is simply a practice of being present, moment by moment. So when you're eating, you're eating, and not thinking of the mortgage you have to pay. When you're chewing, you're chewing; when you're crying, you're crying; when you're dying, you're dying.

Zeiger: Tell us more about your Zen teacher, Katagiri Roshi.

Goldberg: I studied with Katagiri Roshi in Minnesota for twelve years. He came to the U.S. to help Suzuki Roshi, the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Katagiri Roshi has two books, *Returning to Silence* and *You Have to Say Something*. I was taken by him because he seemed very present to me; I felt really *seen* by him. Though he knew me for many years, whenever I walked in, he wasn't full of ideas about who I was. He didn't think, *Oh, there's Natalie*. He saw me anew each time and addressed me in the moment. He was also very willing to tell me the truth, even if I didn't like it. I wrote a book, *Long Quiet Highway*, about my relationship with him. With his backing, I was able to root the idea of writing practice in Zen Buddhism. Zen and writing work beautifully together, because really, where does a piece of writing come from? The mind. The better we understand the mind, the better we can work with it. Zen brought me closer to myself, closer to what it means to be a human being, to my own mind, to the fact that I'm not only living, but am going to die; that I'm dying all the time. It gave me an intimacy with myself.

Zeiger: I needed that intimacy when I was growing up in the fifties. No one talked about anything real. That's why I turned to books.

Goldberg: That happened to me, too. Ironically it was when Zen crossed my path that my Jewish life came alive. Prior to that, I'd written good Jewish poems about the Holocaust and about marrying a non-Jew, but it was when Zen and Judaism

combined that my heart broke open, and so did my voice. It gave me something to say, and gave my work a vitality.

Zeiger: Do you still feel yourself to be a Jew?

Goldberg: I feel very much a Jew. Actually Zen brought me deeper into being a Jew. At one point, during a retreat, I went to Katagiri Roshi and said, "The more I sit, the more Jewish I'm feeling." And he said, "That makes sense. The more you sit, the more you become who you are."

Zeiger: The Dalai Lama also urges us not to abandon the traditions in which we were raised, because they are a part of us.

Goldberg: Exactly. I'm not going to become a Japanese Zen master, just like I'm not going to become F. Scott Fitzgerald. I could be inspired by *The Great Gatsby*, but I'm not going to write *The Great Gatsby 2* — or maybe I will, but it will take place in Brooklyn with potato latkes. What passes on is some life force, but not an imitation.

Zeiger: You mentioned the Holocaust. How did that affect you?

Goldberg: I don't think there's a Jew alive who isn't affected by the Holocaust, even if they respond to it by repressing it and saying it doesn't matter. It scares me. I sometimes find myself thinking, *Oh, Nat, you wouldn't have lasted a minute in the camps.* Or I think, *If someone were chasing me, could I run fast enough to get away?* These thoughts just come up out of the blue. I'm in a crowded room, and I wonder, *Can I get out of here if I need to?* Maybe all minorities feel this way.

Zeiger: What role did Zen play in encouraging you to write and teach?

Goldberg: By my early twenties, I knew somehow that I wanted to write, and I knew I couldn't learn to do it through traditional writing classes, where teachers criticized students' work. I had to begin with what I knew, something no one could tell me I was wrong about. And so I studied my mind. Then I connected my study to this two-thousand-year-old tradition of watching the mind. As I wrote, I would discover things about my mind, how it would move, wander, settle. I would go and discuss my findings with Roshi, and he would say, "Yes, that's how the mind works," or, "No, it doesn't work that way." He's the one who suggested that I make writing a practice.

After I wrote *Bones*, I began teaching writing from the inside out. Usually, writing teachers tell us what good writing is, but not how to get to it. If *Bones* had come out in 1950, it probably would have flopped, but in 1986 America was hungry for it. If I hadn't written *Bones*, someone else would have, because the time was ripe. There were a few good books on the writing shelf, like Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers*, and Dorothea Brandt's *Becoming a Writer*, and Brenda Euland's *If You Want to Write*. But interest in *Bones* crossed every cultural line. Vice-presidents of insurance companies in Florida bought it, and so did quarry workers in Missouri. It was as though people were starving to write, but they didn't know how, because the way writing was taught didn't work for them. I think the idea of writing as a practice freed them up. It meant that they could trust their minds, that they were allowed to fail, and this helped them develop confidence in

their own abilities. But that wasn't all. I also told readers *how* to write. I told them: "Pick up the pen, take out a watch, and keep your hand moving."

Zeiger: You talk about how Zen practice and writing practice are aligned. When you sit and follow your breath, or engage in whatever meditation technique you use, do you experience the same kinds of things as when you practice writing?

Goldberg: One difference is, when I'm writing, I'm physically doing something. I'm holding a pen in my hand, I'm moving my hand across the page, and I'm recording my thoughts as they come through me. When I'm meditating, I'm relatively still. My legs are crossed, my back is straight, and I'm using the breath to anchor my mind. I'm letting go of my thoughts by returning to the breath. With writing, I let go of the thoughts by putting them down and moving on.

I'm more adept at writing practice, because I've given my life to it. When I write, my self disappears. That's ultimately what happens with Zen practice too, but I linger more on my human life with Zen, whereas with writing I'm willing to give it over completely. When I'm done writing, I feel more refreshed, as if I've eaten and digested my angst. The same thing can occur with meditation for me, but in a lesser way. Writing is more alive.

Zeiger: Isn't the ultimate goal of meditation to quiet the mind?

Goldberg: There is no ultimate goal in meditation. Meditation is an acceptance of the mind, however it comes to you. And the mind changes all the time, just as the ocean waves change. Sometimes the water is turbulent, sometimes calm. Thoughts rise and then disappear; you don't grab hold of them. The heart beats, the lungs breathe, and the mind continues to produce thoughts. Even if you've practiced for a long time, it will still produce thoughts, but you're no longer thrown by them. You don't have control of your mind; it goes where it wants to go. But with practice, you can have a relationship with it.

Zeiger: Do you feel it's important for people to work with a writing teacher?

Goldberg: I think that, at some point in one's life, it's good to have a teacher, because a teacher can reflect you back to yourself. Katagiri Roshi once said to me, "I see that you're Buddha, but you don't see it. You only see the greatness in other people. When you see it in yourself, that's what being awake is." To be a Buddha is to close the gap between who you think you are and the greatness of being human. It's not about being conceited or selfish. It's just a deep acceptance of what it is to be human, to have an open heart, to be generous. Often I'll have students who write exquisitely, but there's something missing because they are not connected with their own writing, with their own large human life. I call it "the gap": the distance between who we think we are and who we really are, which is something much greater.

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