

ZEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH NATALIE GOLDBERG

writing

ZEN painting



INTERVIEW BY ELAINE SUTTON

Natalie Goldberg has been practicing Zen meditation and teaching writing for the last twenty-five years. She is the author of the renowned *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* which has sold nearly one million copies and been translated into eight languages. She has also written *Wild Mind*, *Long Quiet Highway*, *Banana Rose* (a novel), and most recently, *Thunder and Lightning*. More of her paintings may be seen in *Living Color: A Writer Paints Her World*. Natalie likes chocolate chip cookies, the smell of the Taos, New Mexico mesa after the rain, pack trips with llamas into the wilderness, cafes and Bob Dylan. For information about her workshop schedule, see www.nataliegoldberg.com.

WHJ: Is writing for you predominantly a way to explore your thoughts and emotions, or is it more of a spiritual practice, something that can take you beyond thought?

NATALIE: Yes, writing has definitely been my primary spiritual practice for 25 years, but it's all rooted in 2000 years of watching the mind in Asian Zen practice. So everything that I do in writing, I've made sure to root it, so it's not Natalie's little creative idea. And it has taken me very deep, and I have of a very deep appreciation for it, more and more as the years go by. I just got back from living in St. Paul, Minnesota for a year and half, practicing pretty much hard-core Zen, and I realized how much writing practice is an American version of Zen. It's taking Hakuin and Dogen and all those people, and adding hamburgers to them. So really interweaving it with our society.

WHJ: So your writing practice is hooked up with your Zen practice?

NATALIE: They're completely interwoven, there's no separation. In the last paragraph of my last book, *Thunder and Lightning*, I declare writing a legitimate Zen practice. And I was thinking about Ryokan, the wonderful Zen master—in his teachings, rather than passing on Dharma heirs, he passed on poetry as his lineage.

WHJ: You also do a lot of painting. How do you see that connecting to your writing and Zen practice?

NATALIE: For a long time painting was just my darling pleasure. It was sort of secret and fun, and it came from my childhood, and from looking at New Yorker covers when I was a kid. Basically I just drew a picture and colored it in. But when I wrote *Living Color*, about painting, I had to go deep and understand what painting really did in my life. And I realized that it really fed my writing, and made me awake to the visual world. And painting is about silence, so I worked out things in writing as I was painting, on an unconscious level.

While I was in St. Paul doing intensive Zen practice, I think I really broke through in my painting to a place I really wanted to go. My Zen teacher, Katagiri Roshi, died

11 years ago, and in the last chapter of *Living Color* I talk about how much I wanted to learn abstract painting, because there was no longer any solid form of Katagiri that existed. And I've been working on abstract painting, and doing it but not showing anyone, and not feeling like I really got it. And in these last months I feel like I crossed the river. I did some very big pieces and they have Zen titles, and they definitely were connected. For instance, I'd sit a sesshin—a Zen retreat where you sit from five am until nine at night. This one was only three days, and usually you're very tired when you come home, but I'd immediately start to paint.

One night it started to rain, those great midwestern rains where it just thunders and storms and then the sky turned yellow, and I did a piece called "The Sound of Rain" and I thought, yes, it's all come together now. I did another piece called "Knocking on Heaven's Door." I couldn't get the answer to a koan I was working on, and I brought this painting in to dokusan—the one-to-one interviews with your teacher—and I said, "I know the answer, but I can't bring it through me right now," and then I held up the picture. And he said, "Yes, you got it in the picture, now get it in you."

WHJ: What about the rest of your life, when you're not writing and painting and sitting? Do you feel the thread of connection between your practices and driving your car and brushing your teeth and having your relationships with other people?

NATALIE: Well it has been my deepest wish, and I've always been aware of a split with artists, between creating great art and being assholes in their lives.

WHJ: I think that's kind of what I'm getting at! How is it all integrated?

NATALIE: I'm also realizing this with Zen teachers. I used to think it was the Asian teachers that could walk their talk, but I'm learning they're sort of like the artists too. They have very deep understanding, but are not always able to embody it in their lives. And I've been aware of that split in myself, and the suffering that that creates. And yet I didn't know how to bring it together—it was almost like two different people. And I think in this last year and a half, I broke through. I feel very shaky about it, and of course you have to keep practicing—it's not something you have and that's it. But something has changed, and it's so fresh for me: I'm happy just to be. Art and creating is about action. I'm happy not to have action now too. Deeply happy.

WHJ: You wrote one novel. Do you think you'll ever write fiction again?

NATALIE: I wrote that novel because I'm a teacher of writing, and I wanted to understand all the forms so I

could help my students. Also, the story gnawed at me, and it seemed like the novel form would be the best way. It was the hardest thing I've ever done—and I've done 100-day Zen practice periods! I learned a tremendous amount. During this last year in St. Paul, there was a story that started to eat at me, and I thought, "oh please, help me, not another novel." And then I said, "Nat, this could be a really short one." I honor fiction as something very, very great. It seems that non-fiction is more coincident with the way the mind moves, and that's what I'm more interested in.

WHJ: I remember in the early days of writing practice, you once said, "I could never write on a computer, because I can't go that fast," and also that it uses a whole different set of mind muscles.

NATALIE: I do all my creative writing long-hand. I know nothing about computers, but I finally got e-mail about eight months ago. What I love about it is that my left hand finally has something to do! You know, I'm completely wired with my right hand and my shoulder and my body. I like writing e-mails to people because it uses all of me. It helps me to become whole. I tell my students that it's okay if they use computers, but to know that it's just a different physical activity, so a slightly different part of the mind comes out—not better or worse, just different. And also, I think it's important to always be able to hand write, because it's an essential thing that we learned when we were very young. And you might not have electricity all the time—what about when you're back-packing? There should never be an excuse not to write.

WHJ: In *Thunder and Lightning*, you warned people several times about becoming writers. You said that it's not necessarily going to make you happy, and it might even cause you tremendous suffering. And that you entered it from a place of innocence—it was your love, and it just dragged you through hell and high water.

NATALIE: I think *Writing Down The Bones* was the young Natalie, the writer: glory, glory, glory. And I've really taken it on since then, and like taking on anything—a marriage, a child—it has made me face a lot that I never knew I'd have to face. And so *Thunder and Lightning* is a person writing a book about writing 16 years later. So really it's the sequel to *Writing Down the Bones*. I'm deep with writing, and I love it and care about it, but it doesn't mean that it's not hard sometimes. If you're going to take it on, know what you're taking on. But we never know what we're taking on! You get married and you have no idea where it's going to lead—you just follow what you love, and stay in there when you don't love it too.

NATALIE GOLDBERG ON WRITING:

Just write.

From Writing Down the Bones. ©1986 Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, www.shambhala.com

Okay. Your kids are climbing into the cereal box. You have \$1.25 left in your checking account. Your husband can't find his shoes, your car won't start, you know you have lived a life of unfulfilled dreams. There is the threat of nuclear holocaust, there is apartheid in South Africa, it is twenty degrees below zero outside, your nose itches, and you don't have even three plates that match to serve dinner on. Your feet are swollen, you need to make a dentist appointment, the dog needs to be let out, you have to defrost the chicken and make a phone call to your cousin in Boston, you're worried about your mother's glaucoma, you forgot to put film in the camera, Safeway has a sale on solid white tuna, you are waiting for a job offer, you just bought a computer and you have to unpack it. You have to start eating sprouts and stop eating doughnuts, you lost your favorite pen, and the cat peed on your current notebook.

Take out another notebook, pick up another pen, and just write, just write, just write. In the middle of the world, make one positive step. In the center of chaos, make one definitive act. Just write. Say yes, stay alive, be awake. Just write. Just write. Just write.

The deepest secret in our heart of hearts is that we are writing because we love the world, and why not finally carry that secret out with our bodies into the living rooms and porches, backyards and grocery stores? Let the whole thing flower: the poem and the person writing the poem. And let us always be kind in this world.

Let go of everything when you write, and try at a simple beginning with simple words to express what you have inside. It won't begin smoothly. Allow yourself to be awkward. You are stripping yourself. You are exposing your life, not how your ego would like to see you represented, but how you are as a human being. And it is because of this that I think writing is religious. It splits you open and softens your heart toward the homely world.

Keep your hand moving

From Wild Mind, Bantam New Age Books, 1990.

When you sit down to write, whether it's for ten minutes or an hour, once you begin, don't stop. If an atom bomb drops at your feet eight minutes after you have begun and you were going to write for ten minutes, don't budge. You'll go out writing.

What is the purpose of this? Most of the time when we write, we mix up the editor and creator. Imagine your writing hand as the creator and the other hand as the editor. Now bring your two hands together and lock your fingers. This is what happens when we write. The writing hand wants to write about what she did Saturday night: "I drank whiskey straight all night and stared at a man's back across the bar. He was wearing a red T-shirt. I imagined him to have the face of Harry Belafonte. At three a.m. he finally turned my way and I spit into the ashtray when I saw him. He had the face of a wet mongrel who had lost his teeth." The writing hand is three words into writing this first sentence—"I drank whisky..."—when the other hand clenches her fingers tighter and the writing hand can't budge. The editor says to the creator, "Now, that's not nice, the whiskey and stuff. Don't let people know that. I have a better idea: 'Last night, I had a nice cup of warmed milk and then went to bed at nine o'clock.' Write that. Go ahead. I'll loosen my grip so you can."

If you keep your creator hand moving, the editor can't catch up with it and lock it. It gets to write out what it wants. "Keep your hand moving" strengthens the creator and gives little space for the editor to jump in.

Keeping your hand moving is the main structure for writing practice.

"You just follow what you love and stay in there when you don't love it too."