

NATALIE GOLDBERG

*Writing  
as Spiritual Practice*



*Cultivate Life!*

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# Writing as Spiritual Practice

## Interview with Natalie Goldberg by Tami Simon

Tami Simon speaks with Natalie Goldberg, a writer and teacher and a painter. She has studied Zen Buddhism for nearly four decades, and is ordained in the Order of Interbeing with Thich Nhat Hanh.

Tami Simon: Welcome to “Insights at the Edge.” Today my guest is Natalie Goldberg. Natalie is a writer and teacher and a painter. She has studied Zen Buddhism for nearly four decades, and is ordained in the Order of Interbeing with Thich Nhat Hanh. Her books include *Old Friend from Far Away: On How to Write Memoir*, *Long Quiet Highway*, *Thunder and Lightning*, *The Great Failure*, and *Writing Down the Bones*, the books based on the methods from her writing workshops. *Writing Down the Bones* is available as a Sounds True audio learning program. As well, many of Natalie’s books are available as books on tape, where she reads the entire book on audio. She’s also created an audio program with Julia Cameron, available through Sounds True, called *The Writing Life*.

In this episode of “Insights at the Edge,” Natalie and I spoke about writing as a spiritual practice, what it means to meet your mind in writing practice, and Natalie’s recent experience of beginning to stand in the role of being a Zen teacher. Here’s my conversation with Natalie Goldberg.

Natalie, I’d love to begin by talking about writing practice, which is something now that you’ve been teaching for, what, over three decades?

Natalie Goldberg: Yes, 35 years.

TS: So writing practice, the idea that I sit down with paper and a pencil or pen, and I set a timer, I decide I’m going to practice writing for X amount of time, and then I don’t stop, I just write, write, write, write, write. So here’s what I’d love to know: 35 years later, how has your experience of this practice changed and evolved?

NG: That’s an interesting question, because you know, when you hear somebody’s been doing something for 35 years, and something that is so simple and basic, you think, “God, don’t you get bored with it? Isn’t it a drag? Are you just doing it because you have to?” And all I can say is, it’s very essential. You know, I’ve grown and changed, I’ve written other books, but I always come back to this simple practice.

It's sort of like, Tami, you drink a glass of water: you can't drink a glass of water and then quit. Water is essential to you. Writing practice is essential to me keeping my mind shapely, and also to keep it honest and to see what I'm really seeing, thinking, and feeling. And it's also the basis of all my writing. It's my foundation. So I actually never grow tired of it. I don't memorize the rules. You think, "Oh, what a dummy! I mean, after all these years, you should know them by heart!" But they're alive for me. It's like a lover or a relationship: you know that person well after 35 years, but they're still alive for you if the relationship is good. There's no—you can't second-guess things; there's always a surprise. And so it's very fresh for me, and I continue to adore teaching it. And when I remember another rule, maybe an hour into the teaching, I'll go, "Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you this one!" And I guess I've been very lucky in that way; either that, or I'm really dumb!

TS: Well, I am curious about this idea that you haven't memorized the rules. I guess I didn't realize that there were very many rules involved in writing practice. How many rules are there?

NG: The one that holds true, the only one you have to remember, is keep your hand moving. Because that is a chance to separate out the creator and the editor. And often we mix them up and freeze, because the editor is at our shoulder telling us to stop writing. That's not nice. "Oh, you didn't put a period in! Oh, your mother will be mad at that." And pretty much you're frozen, and you don't ever get to touch your genuine mind, what I call your wild mind. But when you keep your hand moving, there's a chance for something real to come out.

And when I say, "Keep your hand moving," I mean physically, your hand writing, your hand connected to your arm, to your shoulder, to your heart. Now of course, I know now people use computers. You can do a computer too, but you should never forget how to handwrite. Just like if you have a car, you can't forget to walk; you have to still know how to walk. You know, with the current economy, you might not have any electricity [because] you can't afford it, or you have to hock your computer. You should always know how to write, because that, I promise, you can always at least get paper and pen.

TS: Now, the essential rule is to keep your hand moving. So let's say you pick a topic that you're going to write on for X amount of time—let's say I'm going to write about my mother or something X amount—and I just run out of things to say, but I have to keep my hand moving. Do I just write, "Blah, blah, blah," until another word comes through my hand, or what do I do?

NG: You could do that. The other thing is, you can trust yourself, you can trust that the mind is always whipping up new thoughts. So if you relax, and you run out of things about your mother, that might be when things really start happening.

So just, you know, write “Mother, mother, mother,” or “Blah, blah, blah.” “Blah, blah, blah” is a little deadening; I’d go, “Mother, mother, mother.” And then maybe something real underneath might come up. You might start talking about an onion, and that onion will lead you to a place and an angle you never thought about your mother. So you know, you’re working with the human mind. The human mind can’t be controlled, and it’s not chronological. That’s why I can’t teach writing A-B-C, and voila, you’re a writer!

So yes, just keep going, and have a confidence that there’s a richness in you. And I hear someone saying right now, “Yeah, there’s no richness in me. Maybe in you, Natalie.” No; I promise you, it’s the makeup of every human being. Once you step out of discursive thinking and trying to control things, there’s a wealth underneath.

And I realize, Tami, I didn’t finish the question earlier. There are some other rules that support [the rule] “Keep your hand moving.” One of them is, lose control; say what you really want to say, not what you think you should say. Feel free to write the worst junk in America. You need a lot of space in order to write, and you can’t expect your first word to be the beginning of *War and Peace*, which many of us do, and then we quit.

Those are two rules; I can’t remember any others right now! They’ll come up maybe as we talk.

TS: Well, you’ve made an important point, which is that writing practice helps you get below your discursive mind. And you’ve also mentioned that it helps you keep your mind shapely; I think you used those exact words. Can you tell me more about that? I mean, first of all, my concern would be, what if writing practice is just, you know, the outflowing of my discursive mind? What’s so valuable about that? How’s that going to keep my mind shapely?

NG: You’ll get bored right away.

TS: Yes.

NG: You’ll get bored of your complaining and you’ll stop writing. It’s built-in. Because it’s not alive, discursive thinking: “Yada, yada, yada. Oh, I don’t know what I should do today. Oh, I’m in a bad mood. Should I have a piece of chicken, or I don’t know . . .” And it just goes on that way for hours and years. But when you physically try to put it down on paper, after a while it gets really boring.

And so what I say is, catch yourself, cut it off, put [a dash mark, then write]: “What I really want to say is,” and drop to that deeper level. And then things will be alive. That’s why I keep writing; that’s why people I know keep writing.

Writing is the act of discovery, not the act of my complaining or saying things over and over.

TS: So what you mean by “keeping your mind shapely” has something to do with discovery?

NG: “Shapely” means that I’m connected to it, that it hasn’t run away from me. For instance, that I have, you know, some terrible nightmares this week, and that I ignore them; that I have a fight with a good friend, and I ignore it; that I’m completely broke, I found out I have no money in my mind, and I ignore it. And I sit down and try to write about the pretty rose in front of me. To keep the mind shapely is to accept all dynamics of your human mind and your human life.

By keeping my mind shapely, I’m going to write a book now about one topic, but it’ll get leaky and kind of smelly if I don’t take care of the rest of my life with the writing practice, and include it in writing practice, so when I aim for the book, it doesn’t pour out in the book and get off. Does that make sense?

TS: It does make sense. Now, I saw on your website that you’re teaching workshops where you combine writing practice with sitting meditation practice and also walking. And I’d love for you to talk a little bit about how this retreat format came into being, and what you think the relationship is between these three practices: writing, walking, and sitting.

NG: Well, you know, it’s sort of as though I’m just coming out. I have slowly shown what backed up writing practice, and really it’s 2,000 years of watching the mind. It’s not a creative little idea that Natalie had.

And now, probably in about a year, you won’t be able to study with me unless you’re also doing sitting and walking, because writing for me is a completely legitimate Zen practice. And I’ve sat many, many, many retreats, and now the thing that I’ve added to the retreats, meditation retreats, often they do sitting and walking, [and] I’ve added writing. Not writing as a nice little activity to feel good. I actually make it, you sit, the bell rings, you pick up your pen and notebook, you write. You put your pen down, you read aloud. You put your notebook away, you do walking. So I’ve made it integral into the practice of meditation. And I think people who read my work have really been asking for that. You know, otherwise they can go get an MFA from a university. What I teach is a priori writing. You trust in your own mind and a connection with yourself. And with all beings, because we’re not separate.

TS: Now, that’s an interesting phrase: “a priori writing.”

NG: Yes, that’s a phrase— I like it. It’s Latin, I think, and it means “before.” You learn to write; you get it as a practice before you decide to write an essay or a

novel or a memoir or a newspaper article or a PhD dissertation. It's about building your spine, and it's confidence in your own experience, a trust in yourself, and an understanding of how the human mind works.

TS: Now, 35 years of writing practice yourself and teaching writing practice, I'm curious if you could let us know where you have seen people get stuck with writing practice, or your own experience of getting stuck with writing practice, and what then dislodges it.

NG: Well, people believe their monkey mind or their critic that says, "This will go no place; this is a waste of time." We apply it to anything we really want in life. The people who come to study with me want writing, so they apply it to writing. You know, "This is stupid, you have a family, why are you doing this? No one will like it; you might reveal things that aren't right." And yet, I tell my students, "You traveled all the way here to be with me. Don't believe that little voice. Something in you wants it bad, because it's a long trip to get here." And that voice, we keep working with it. And sometimes the voice gets so loud that I tell people, "OK, 10 minutes. Let monkey mind out. Just let it rip, and let's study what it has to say."

So unfortunately, we follow that critic in us as though it was God: "I hate you, you're stupid." And we believe it all. And really, it's just a dot in the huge sky.

TS: Now, you've made this very strong statement that writing is a legitimate, I think did you say "Zen practice," a legitimate spiritual practice. And I'm curious, is it possible that anything can be a legitimate practice? I mean, I've heard people say, "My relationship is my practice." Could we take this further and say, "Gardening is my legitimate Zen practice"?

NG: Yes, I guess so. But you know what? I think the meditation element is important, just facing your mind with nothing. And when you're gardening, you have an activity, and you can get very worked up, and want to really achieve something: "I have to have the best flowers, the best roses." And you can do that with writing practice: "I'm going to make a great novel." That's why I separate writing practice from writing a novel. Writing practice is just meeting your mind over and over. But there's something wonderful about adding the element of just facing the mind with no activity at all.

And I think both of those together make it a really strong practice, you know, just like a relationship. I always get nervous when people say, "My relationship is my practice." My relationship could drive me crazy, and I need another backdrop, another foot to stand on someplace else. If my relationship is my relationship and my practice, I can get really lost. I need another practice, like sitting or writing, maybe gardening, to balance out that relationship. Because you know, once you get involved with someone else, things get wild.

TS: Um-hmm. I guess what I'm driving at is to understand from your perspective what qualifies anything, whether it's gardening or whatever, or writing, as a legitimate practice. Because people could write, and it wouldn't be a spiritual practice, as we've alluded to here.

NG: Yes.

TS: So what makes anything a legitimate spiritual practice?

NG: That's a really good question. And actually, I had students that studied with me for a year, and I realized they didn't understand what practice is. Practice is simply something that you do, and you commit yourself to, and you do it regularly, first of all regularly whether you want to or not, and also with no gaining idea; I'm not going to get better, I'm— Because people come to meditation practice with the idea, "I'm going to become really peaceful." Where it's not always true; you start sitting, and all the wild animals come up inside you. So it's something without a gaining idea, but to look at whatever comes up, and to continue under all circumstances, making a commitment.

So maybe you just say something simple, like "I'm going to write for 20 minutes five times a week." Put down when, where, and show up, whether you want to or not. There's no yes or no; it's just there, just like brushing your teeth in the morning. You don't think, "Oh, I had a beautiful toothbrushing today!" It becomes beyond our criticism; you just show up.

TS: Let's say I make a commitment like that, five times a week, 20 minutes. The content that I write about, do I just spill out, tell the truth, whatever's in my mind? Do I pick topics? What about that?

NG: It can develop. At the beginning, maybe you decide, "I just want to hear what my mind thinks. I just want to have a relationship." And then, "I think I'll do for three weeks—" I mean, when you commit to it as a practice, how luxurious; you can think, "Oh, for three weeks I'm going to do just 'I remember.' And every time I sit down, I begin with 'I remember.'" And after three weeks, you can—

You know, I'm an old camp counselor; you want to keep your practice alive. And if you show up and just do 20 minutes and it's dead, then do something, cut into it. Go write in a café, and instead of writing everything you think and feel, write about what you see in front of you. Practice that. Practice describing the young man in front of you eating potato chips. You have to keep it alive; it doesn't have to be hot all the time, but— I know people who practice for years, meditation practice, writing, and it's not alive. They just show up. It's not enough just to show up; you've got to put your whole mind and heart on the line.



TS: Now, you said you're an old camp counselor. Did you say that because you have to find aliveness if you're a camp counselor in order to keep the campers engaged and entertained? Is that what you mean?

NG: I make up activities, like "I remember." "OK, Nat, your writing has been pretty dull. I want you to walk to the café, do slow walking, and then as soon as you hit the café, open your notebook and go." Just do different things, even physical things, like slow walking to the café, and see if that changes things. So I adjust things. That's what I mean by camp counselor. I can think of activities.

TS: OK. Now, I'm curious: in 35 years, have you ever just said, "You know, I'm tired of this, I'm going to give it a break. I'm not going to do any writing practice until I feel like I want to," and then before you knew it, six months had passed, or something like that?

NG: Yes. Not six months, though. Six months is too long; I would go a little crazy before that. Yes, sometimes I think— I always think it, Tami! There's always a voice in me that's says, "Oh, puh-leese! Can't we think of something else to do, Natalie?" And you know, once in a while I listen to her and say, "OK, let's try something new." You know, like hiking or painting. And then what happens is, it doesn't meet my mind in the same way. When I'm writing, there's no split in me; the whole of me is there. And I get lonesome for that.

Sure, I think, "This is what you're going to do your whole life, just write?" Guess so! When Collette was 86 years old, I think it was 86 or 82—you know, the French writer?

TS: Yes.

NG: She couldn't go skiing anymore, and her husband and some friends were going to do skiing at a resort, and she made the excuse, rather than say her body didn't feel good, because her husband was 15 years younger, instead she said, "You know, I just have something to write, and I'll just not go skiing today." And she realized when she faced this place, she realized that writing only leads to more writing. Which is kind of wonderful. That's it; that's it. You pick something, and that's it.

But don't think that I don't think, "Well, maybe I could become a race car driver. Can't you do something exciting, Natalie?" But this is my life, and the truth is, I love it.

TS: You know, I've interviewed you before, Natalie, and always enjoy our conversations. And there's one thing I remember very clearly that you said, and I'd love to talk more about it, which is we were talking about writing practice, and the relationship between writing practice and published works, and actually

creating a book. And you said, “If you do enough, writing practice, the natural structure of your next book will emerge from your writing practice.” And that always stuck with me, and I’m curious if you could comment on that, if that continues to be your experience, and if that continues to be what you see in your students.

NG: Yes, it does seem to be, for me. You’d have to speak to my students. I think it’s true for them; we’ve never actually discussed this. Certainly they don’t seem—I have a bunch of students writing memoirs and stuff, and they don’t seem to have problems, because I’ve trained them about what structure is about. But for me, yes. The organic structure for the next book comes out of what I need to say, and how I’m writing about it.

For instance, I can’t say why, this book that I’m starting now, the chapters are going to be longer, maybe because I’m an old girl now and I have more to say in each chapter, and I want to make sure to get into every corner of whatever I bring up. Maybe it’s because I’ve gotten older and I’m more thorough, and it’s coincident with the structure being 63, and practicing for 35 years.

I’m just now thinking of one of my students who does a lot of political work and flies back and forth to the Philippines. She wrote on the plane ride, the entire plane ride, and this went on for about eight years, and she realized, only in looking back, that she had been really writing a novel about the Philippines during those plane rides. Sometimes you don’t realize your structure, because it’s so organic, until you look back. Does this make sense?

TS: Yes, it does. I’m curious about the book you’re starting to work on now, if you can tell us more about it.

NG: Well, it’s so apropos, it’s called *Sit, Walk, Write: The True Secret*. I’ve been teaching silent retreats for the last 10 years, leading them, with that title. And I think it was a year ago, in the silent retreat I thought, “You know, nobody else is doing this, and you need to record it. You need to get this out.” You know, as you get older, there’s an urgency.

TS: Tell me more about that; what is the urgency?

NG: Well, you’re not going to be around forever. You know, *Writing Down the Bones* came out when I was in my thirties, so it just seemed like I would go on forever. For instance, I teach a “Sit, Walk, Write” retreat every August and every December for students who’ve studied with me before. And I realized, they think it’s an institution, but you know, I’m not an institution, and some day I’m going to die. I’m not going to be around forever.

TS: But I'm curious, is the urgency some sense of wanting your ideas to be immortalized, just wanting to express yourself for a sense of fulfillment? What really is it?

NG: It's love, Tami. It's love. I love this work and I love my students, and I want to share it, because I see that it's helped.

TS: Well, that is a very beautiful answer.

NG: Oh, thank you. It's the truth.

TS: Now, the idea for *Sit, Walk, Write* came to you during a meditation retreat?

NG: Yes, when we were driving to the Rio Grande. In the August retreat, we're silent for a week, and at the last day we go swimming in silence in the Rio Grande. And driving through the gorge, it was so beautiful, and people were just glowing and deep in themselves. And also there were a few students—students return over and over, and there were several who couldn't swim before, and took swimming lessons during the year so that when we went this time to the Rio Grande, they could go in, and you could feel their anticipation and nervousness; it seemed like they even had new bathing suits. And it was so beautiful, I wanted to share it.

TS: And could you see in your writing-practice journals the seeds for the new book, the organic structure of the new book? Was it there?

NG: Oh. You know, I don't always reread my new books. It's in my body; it's in my being. Now, when I'm going to write the book, I am going to go through my old notebooks, because I'll probably have some good things there that I can pick out of it. But it's more in my body.

You know, like when I wrote the book, also my outline is—you know, they ask for an outline, my outline is just a list. Like one of the things on the list was "Ants fighting under the chair at Plum Village" or "So-and-so diving in the water." And then I'll use that as the topic, remember, and then go, and then just keep writing. It's all in me; when you write, it comes out of you. We think we don't remember things, but you'd be amazed what comes up when you write. It's a chance to live your life twice.

TS: Um-hmm. I have a question about that, that idea of living your life twice. On the one hand, you can remember and go back and live your life twice, but what about just living it right now, present, forward? Do you know what I mean? Like, I don't want to go live that thing twice when I could live a lot of new things once.

NG: Well, you know, there's a Yiddish word, *haza*. *Haza* means pig. And we keep wanting to do too many things. How wonderful to be present with your life right now, and to feel it's richness. And you know when you write, you only find your memories in the present moment. The more you're present now, the more your past comes up and enriches you. Or horrifies you. And we don't have to constantly be running ahead of ourselves to get new activities. I tell my students, "You could stop now and have enough to write about forever." Probably you could stop at 12 and have enough to write about!

TS: Well, that's funny that you brought up the Yiddish word *haza*, pig. You mean that the person who's always seeking the next experience, the next experience.

NG: Yes. The next hit. Yes. Like you described, you said, "Well, why not just go on, I could be in the present and then go on to plenty more new things? Why taste something over again?" Because usually we never taste it once. And if we were really tasting things, we wouldn't be running ahead of ourselves so much.

TS: Now, you mentioned kind of in passing that in working with your students, you've taught them the basics of structure, the structure that it takes to write a published book, so that they may not have this same question about the structure for a book emerging from writing practice. And I'm curious, what are those basics about structure that you teach your students?

NG: OK, so in the "Sit, Walk, Write," it's the structure of the *zendo*. I have them all lined up, sitting against the wall; the structure of the bell rings, they switch into another activity; the structure when we're doing walking, I tell them not to cut corners—often they end up curving around the corners; [I tell them,] "Do not cut corners." They fully follow the structure of the room, the structure of the day that's been set up, the structure that if you signed up to do the sweeping on the porch, when it's your time, just do it; don't think about it. Don't think, "Well, the porch looks pretty clean, I don't need to do it." If it's your time, you do it.

So the structure that I teach— Oh, and then there's of course the built-in structure of writing practice. Pen, paper, the human mind, go, ten minutes. Just like the structure of meditation: the bells rings, you sit for 10 minutes, 20, a half hour, 40 minutes, and whatever comes up, you don't get tossed away; you sit with it. These are all structures, fundamental structures, that if they're in your body, when it's time to find a structure for a book, you'll be able—it's natural; it's coming out of a whole life of structure.

We all have structures. We brush our teeth in the morning—I seem to be bringing up our teeth a lot lately! But, you know, we brush our hair. These are unconscious structures. We can tune in to them.

TS: Um-hmm. So what would you say to someone who— I mean, I can hear this answer, but I can still imagine the listener who says, “I’ve so much inside of me, but I don’t know what the structure of this book I feel called to write is. It’s in my body, but how do I access it? I still don’t know what it is.”

NG: OK, well, what are you called to write? First of all, I tell people that they have to do writing practice for two years before they try to do something, do a book or anything, because they need to have a relationship with their mind. Find out what your real obsessions are, where your real energy is, where it will—you know, because you have to carry a book for a long time. It can’t be just, you walked down the street and you saw a couple arguing and thinking, “Oh, I’ll write about that for a book.” It won’t work; it has to come integrally from inside you.

So once they have that, then I’d say, “OK, well, what is this thing that you have inside you? Start making a list of the things you have inside you that you want to write about.” You make that list, and then each time you sit down to write, grab one of the things off your list, put it on the top of the page as a topic, and go.

So I’m giving you a structure right now, and explaining that as a way to enter your mind and enter the book you think you want to write. I even hesitate to say “book”; the project you want to do, because we always run ahead of ourselves. So then you have this project ahead of you, when in the act of doing it, things will evolve. But I’ve given you the beginning structure of how to enter it. I promise, if you do this, one thing will lead to another.

TS: Now, Natalie, I know you’ve been teaching people about how to write memoir, specifically, and have written a book on that, and created an audio program with Sounds True called *Old Friend from Far Away: On How to Write Memoir*. And I know that a lot of people want to write their own memoir as a process of self-learning, self-discovery, and as you said, living your life twice. And I’m curious, what do you think makes a memoir something that someone else wants to read, not just something I’ve enjoyed writing and how I’ve learned a lot about myself? And is that even a worthwhile consideration?

NG: Well, yes, it’s worthwhile if you want to publish it. If you want to just enjoy writing a memoir, you should just write a memoir. If you want to publish it, there’s another element that has to happen. And I’m thinking now what it could be.

For instance, OK, I spent two years writing a memoir about me and my mother. The problem with that memoir was I needed a third thing. My mother and I staring at each other, we never got along, was not enough to carry it. It needed another dimension. But I was so obsessed with my mother and me, and needed so badly to get that down, that I didn’t care; I just wrote it how I wanted to write it, and how I experienced the relationship. Now, it was deep satisfaction for me; I

feel like it really helped my life, actually more than some books I wrote where I put in the third thing. But now, if I want to make it something to publish, I have to find some other understanding or dimension about it, that who was my mother outside of Natalie Goldberg? Does that make sense?

TS: Yes, it's very interesting. Tell me what a third thing might be, or how in other books of yours that were memoir-style, what was the third thing, maybe give an example?

NG: OK, well, I'm playing now—I went to Auschwitz on a meditation retreat for five days in June. It was horrific, and I wanted to go; horrific because it was unbearable. So that would be an element I might put in, because my mother, I think, carried the unconscious fear of her immigrant family. And when I was born in 1948, that's when the news came out about what was happening in the camps. And as a Jew, it was terrifying. But my family had no way of metabolizing, talking about, doing anything with it. And so it just went straight away into the unconscious. And I think my mother carried it for our family. That's a whole new dimension, a third thing thrown in between my mother and me that could really open up the book in a new way. You see what I mean?

TS: I do. So the idea is that the reader is only so interested in any one person's sort of inner experiences, unless there's something more universal that is being looked at. Is that kind of what you're saying, in a different way of saying it?

NG: Yes. But sometimes, you can write a magnificent book. I'm thinking almost more you could pull it off more with a novel, with just two characters. It would be beautiful. But because it's a memoir, me and my mother, there was a limit; there was a limit to us. I didn't have other dimensions to it.

TS: Um-hmm. Now, did you feel terribly disappointed? Here you spent all this time working on this, and even though it was satisfying personally, that you had to look at it, even after all the books you've published, and say, "I've spent all this time and, wow, I don't think this thing I've been working on is particularly publishable."

NG: Well, no. I actually sent it out. I sent it out; my agent sent it to about, I don't know, 15 publishers. Two editors wanted it, and the publishers were horrified, because I didn't have a good relationship with my mother, and they said, "It's just too dark." But you know the thing I loved, Tami, was everyone said it was beautifully written. I was very happy. And I got the final rejection on a Friday, and on Monday I wrote the proposal for this new book, and I knew that I would just sit with the other book.

You know, life is long, and I hopefully will figure out something eventually. But I know I won't get it by beating myself up; I'll get it by opening, relaxing, and

holding it, and just kind of mulling it over while I do this new book. That's why I say students should study with me, because this is an area I'm clear; I'm just not so caught. Now, if you ask about relationships, you shouldn't come study with me; I'll make you crazy!

TS: OK, very good! Point well taken.

You know, I have a slightly different topic I'd like to talk to you about, and it has to do with your relationship with Katagiri Roshi as your Zen teacher. And the thing I'm curious about, though, is here now, do you consider yourself a spiritual teacher in a similar or different way than Katagiri Roshi was with you?

NG: Oh, that's a very good question. You know, I only recently am willing to see myself as a spiritual teacher. And I don't like the word "spiritual," because it's too general. So a Zen teacher, a Zen writing teacher. And only because I'm realizing my students who've studied with me a long time, they've said to me recently point blank, "You know, you're not just our writing teacher." So I had to really admit that.

But yes, Katagiri. I study with other wonderful teachers, but he was my seminal teacher; he really is the core of my life, my spiritual life, if you call it that, my spiritual life or my Zen life. And I feel like I am passing on his teachings, but through Natalie Goldberg, who happens to be Jewish, from Brooklyn, a woman, a writer, a feminist. So I've taken what he's taught me, and put it through my filter, but hopefully the essence is still the same, is still "Wake up! Shut up! Do what's in front of you. Get here. At the same time, have kind consideration for all sentient beings, every moment, forever."

TS: So it sounds like the idea of standing in that role as a Zen writing teacher is something that's just sort of beginning to dawn on you as something you're comfortable standing in fully?

NG: Yes, I think that's true; I think that's true. I think I always held it, I definitely taught out of it, but I'm willing to become transparent with it, I think.

TS: And knowing what you know about your relationship as a student to a spiritual teacher, what do you expect from your students? What do you want from them? Or what is the bond? What's their responsibility, what's your responsibility? How do you see that?

NG: My hope for them is that they keep practicing, that the seed has been planted deep enough that they keep practicing. I don't see them all the time, like Katagiri and I [did], but I have students who come sometimes several times a year, or once a year over many years, but they keep coming. And when they're not with me,

that the seed has been planted deep enough and creative enough that they can find a way through to keep practicing, and to keep it alive.

TS: Wonderful. And I know in your book *The Great Failure*, part of what you were working with had to do with the teacher-student relationship, and also a sense of disappointment that you went through in relationship to just more information coming to the surface about Katagiri Roshi's life, things that you didn't know about when he was alive as your teacher. And I'm curious where you are in your process with disappointment in Katagiri specifically, and just in spiritual teachers.

NG: Well, I think I'm much more realistic. I'm not as idealistic. And writing that book, *The Great Failure*, which I think actually I wrote—I read it; you have the audio book on that. Writing that book, and then having it come out, and a lot of people being very angry at me, I pretty much lost the whole Minnesota sangha from it; they disappeared. I think that's when I really grew up; I became my own authority. You know, I've been very successful, and people loved my books, so I thought they would love this one, too, when I continued to tell the truth. And I realized, the earlier ones, they liked the truth I was telling. And with this one, I grew up, and I became my own authority.

I still love and honor Katagiri, and I've gone on. He's been dead 20 years.

TS: That's interesting, in terms of you stepping into more of your own authority. Can you tell me more about that?

NG: Well, there's nobody there but me. And the truth is, for instance, I kept saying, "Oh, in *Writing Down the Bones*, I kept referring to Katagiri and kind of hiding behind him, because it was too scary at the time to stand up behind what I thought and felt, but I really truly put it in the book. And now I'm standing up with it: "Yes, it was me who wrote that book. And it was me who had those understandings." Not that it wasn't enriched by my practice of those years in Minnesota with Katagiri, but I knew those things. It's Natalie who knew them.

You know, as a woman, in our society I was brought up in the fifties and sixties. We were not meant to have our own authority, and to believe in our own minds. So it's been a long journey. I haven't quit; I kept going, and I've grown into it, slowly.

TS: Wonderful. And just one final question, Natalie. Our program is called "Insights at the Edge," and I'm always curious to hear the "edge," what people are working on in their own life that they experience as their kind of growing challenge, or at least one of them, a growing challenge, something that you feel comfortable sharing with us.



NG: My growing edge now is something having to do with the Nazis. The terror that came up for me, and the horror. You know, I understand; I read a lot of African literature, and I'm very aware of the horror, especially with the civil rights movement, the South, and I've always cared about human rights. But I'm a Jew, and when I went to Auschwitz, it was no longer caring about someone else: it was me on the line. How can I hold my humanity and my heart, and face the Nazis?

Now, I know it sounds like they're still around, but for me it's something I have to keep dealing with. How can I face that kind of horror, and stay connected to my own humanity and my own heart, and not freak out? And in the face of it, they might kill me, but not lose who I am.

TS: So it sounds like that inquiry is taking you deeper into your own vulnerable heart, exposed in the midst of that kind of horror.

NG: Oh, boy, Tami, you're not kidding! You're not kidding.

TS: Well, thank you, Natalie. It's been, as always, wonderful to talk with you. Natalie Goldberg, she has created with Sounds True a whole series of audio programs: her classic book *Writing Down the Bones* is available as an audio title, as well as *Old Friend from Far Away: On How to Write Memoir*. As well, we've recorded several of Natalie's books on tape, she's read the books in their entirety: *Long Quiet Highway*, *The Great Failure*, *Thunder and Lightning*. And we've also produced a program *Natalie Goldberg and Julia Cameron, A Conversation on the Writing Life*.

*Natalie, thank you so much!*

*NG: Thank you. It was a pleasure again. I didn't realize how much I missed you.*

*TS: I know. We have to stay closer.*

*NG: Yes. It was wonderful, thank you, Tami. ###*

**Natalie Goldberg** is a poet, teacher, writer, and painter. A student of Zen Buddhism for 24 years, she trained intensively with Katagiri Roshi for 12 years, and is ordained in the Order of Interbeing with Thich Nhat Hanh. Natalie Goldberg teaches writing workshops nationally based on the methods presented in *Writing Down the Bones*. Her other books include *Wild Mind*; *Long Quiet Highway*; *Banana Rose*; and *Living Color*.  
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