

... Writing  
Down  
the Bones

*Freeing the Writer Within*

Expanded with a new preface  
and interview with the author

NATALIE GOLDBERG

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## Introduction

I WAS A GOODY TWO-SHOES all through school. I wanted my teachers to like me. I learned commas, colons, semicolons. I wrote compositions with clear sentences that were dull and boring. Nowhere was there an original thought or genuine feeling. I was eager to give the teachers what I thought they wanted.

In college I was in love with literature. I mean wild about it. I typed poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins over and over again so I could memorize them. I read John Milton, Shelley, Keats aloud and then swooned on my narrow bed in the dormitory. In college in the late sixties, I read almost exclusively male writers, usually dead, from England and the rest of Europe. They were very far removed from my daily life, and though I loved them, none of them reflected my experience. I must have subconsciously surmised that writing was not within my ken. It never occurred to me to write, though I secretly wanted to marry a poet.

After I graduated college and discovered that no one was going to hire me to read novels and swoon over poetry, three friends and I started a co-op restaurant and cooked and served natural food lunches in the basement of the Newman Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This was the early seventies, and one year before the opening of the restaurant I had tasted my first avocado. The restaurant was called Naked Lunch, after the

novel by William Burroughs—"a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork." In the morning I baked muffins with raisins and muffins with blueberries or even with peanut butter if I wanted. Naturally, I hoped the customers would like them, but I knew if I cared about the muffins, they usually were good. We had created the restaurant. There was no great answer outside ourselves that would get us an A in school anymore. It was the very beginning of learning to trust my own mind.

One Tuesday I was making ratatouille for lunch. When you make it for a restaurant, you don't cut up one onion and one eggplant. The counter was filled with onions, eggplants, zucchinis, tomatoes, and garlic. I spent several hours chopping and slicing. Walking home from work that night, I stopped in the Centicore Bookstore on State Street and wandered up and down the aisles. I saw a thin volume of poetry entitled *Fruits and Vegetables* by Erica Jong. (Jong had not come out with her novel *Fear of Flying* yet and was still unknown.) The first poem I opened to in the book was about cooking an eggplant! I was amazed: "You mean you can write about something like that?" Something as ordinary as that? Something that I did in my life? A synapse connected in my brain. I went home with the resolve to write what I knew and to trust my own thoughts and feelings and to not look outside myself. I was not in school anymore: I could say what I wanted. I began to write about my family because nobody could say I was wrong. I knew them better than anyone else.

This all happened fifteen years ago. A friend once told me: "Trust in love and it will take you where you need to go." I want to add, "Trust in *what* you love, continue to do it, and it will take you where you need to go." And don't worry too much about security. You will eventually have a deep security when you begin to do what you want. How many of us with our big salaries are actually secure anyway?

I have taught writing workshops for the last eleven years at the University of New Mexico; at the Lama Foundation; to the hippies in Taos, New Mexico; for nuns in Albuquerque; to juvenile delinquents in Boulder; at the University of Minnesota; at Northeast College, a technical school in Norfolk, Nebraska; as Minnesota Poet-in-the-Schools; at Sunday-night writing groups in my home, to gay men's groups. I teach the same methods over and over again. It is such basic information about trusting your own mind and creating a confidence in your experience that I have never grown tired of teaching it. Instead my understanding continues to deepen.

In 1974 I began to do sitting meditation. From 1978 to 1984 I studied Zen formally with Dainin Katagiri Roshi (*Roshi* is a title for a Zen master) at the Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis. Whenever I went to see him and asked him a question about Buddhism, I had trouble understanding the answer until he said, "You know, like in writing when you . . ." When he referred to writing, I understood. About three years ago he said to me, "Why do you come to sit meditation? Why don't you make writing your practice? If you go deep enough in writing, it will take you everywhere."

This book is about writing. It is also about using writing as your practice, as a way to help you penetrate your life and become sane. What is said here about writing can be applied to running, painting, anything you love and have chosen to work with in your life. When I read several chapters to my friend John Rollwagen, president of Cray Research, he said, "Why, Natalie, you're talking about business. That's the way it is in business. There is no difference."

Learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer. One neat truth about writing cannot answer it all. There are many truths. To do writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life. If you receive instructions on how to set a broken bone in your

ankle, you can't use those same instructions to fill a cavity in your teeth. You might read a section in this book that says to be very specific and precise. That's to help the ailment of abstract, general meandering in your writing. But then you read another chapter that says lose control, write on waves of emotion. That's to encourage you to really say deep down what you need to say. Or in one chapter it says to fix up a studio, that you need a private place to write; the next chapter says, "Get out of the house, away from the dirty dishes. Go write in a café." Some techniques are appropriate at some times and some for other times. Every moment is different. Different things work. One isn't wrong and the other right.

When I teach a class, I want the students to be "writing down the bones," the essential, awake speech of their minds. But I also know I can't just say, "Okay, write clearly and with great honesty." In class we try different techniques or methods. Eventually, the students hit the mark, come home to what they need to say and how they need to say it. But it is rarely, "Okay, in the third class after we have covered this and this, you will write well."

It is the same for reading this book. The book can be read consecutively and that may be good the first time through. You may also open to any chapter and read it. Each chapter is designed to be its own whole. Relax as you read and absorb it, as by osmosis, with your whole body and mind. And don't just read it. Write. Trust yourself. Learn your own needs. Use this book.



## *Beginner's Mind, Pen and Paper*

WHEN I TEACH a beginning class, it is good. I have to come back to beginner's mind, the first way I thought and felt about writing. In a sense, that beginner's mind is what we must come back to every time we sit down and write. There is no security, no assurance that because we wrote something good two months ago, we will do it again. Actually, every time we begin, we wonder how we ever did it before. Each time is a new journey with no maps.

So when I teach a writing group, I have to tell the story all over again and remember that the students are hearing it for the first time. I must begin at the very beginning.

First, consider the pen you write with. It should be a fast-writing pen because your thoughts are always much faster than your hand. You don't want to slow up your hand even more with a slow pen. A ballpoint, a pencil, a felt tip, for sure, are slow. Go to a stationery store and see what feels good to you. Try out different kinds. Don't get too fancy and expensive. I mostly use a cheap Sheaffer fountain pen, about \$1.95. It has replaceable cartridges. I've bought hundreds over the years. I've had every color; they often leak, but they are fast. The new roller pens that are out now are fast too, but there's a slight loss of control. You want to be able to feel the connection and texture of the pen on paper.

Think, too, about your notebook. It is important. This is your equipment, like hammer and nails to a carpenter. (Feel fortunate—for very little money you are in business!) Sometimes people buy expensive hardcover journals. They are bulky and heavy, and because they are fancy, you are compelled to write something good. Instead you should feel that you have permission to write the worst junk in the world and it would be okay. Give yourself a lot of space in which to explore writing. A cheap spiral notebook lets you feel that you can fill it quickly and afford another. Also, it is easy to carry. (I often buy notebook-size purses.)

Garfield, the Muppets, Mickey Mouse, Star Wars. I use notebooks with funny covers. They come out fresh in September when school starts. They are a quarter more than the plain spirals, but I like them. I can't take myself too seriously when I open up a Peanuts notebook. It also helps me locate them more easily—"Oh, yes, that summer I wrote in the rodeo series notebooks." Try out different kinds—blank, lined, or graphed pages, hard or soft-covered. In the end, it must work for you.

The size of your notebook matters too. A small notebook can be kept in your pocket, but then you have small thoughts. That's okay. William Carlos Williams, the famous American poet who was also a children's doctor, wrote many of his poems on prescription pads in between office visits by his patients.

### *Detail*

Doc, I bin lookin' for you  
I owe you two bucks.

How you doin'?

Fine. When I get it  
I'll bring it up to you.<sup>1</sup>

You can find many prescription-pad-size poems in his collected works.

Sometimes, instead of writing in a notebook, you might want to directly type out your thoughts. Writing is physical and is affected by the equipment you use. In typing, your fingers hit keys and the result is block, black letters: a different aspect of yourself may come out. I have found that when I am writing something emotional, I must write it the first time directly with hand on paper. Handwriting is more connected to the movement of the heart. Yet, when I tell stories, I go straight to the typewriter.

Another thing you can try is speaking into a tape recorder and feeling how it is to directly record your voice speaking your thoughts. Or you might use it for convenience' sake: you might be working on the hem of a dress and you begin to think how it was with your ex-husband and you want to write about it. Your hands are busy sewing; you can talk about it into a recorder.

I have not worked very much with a computer, but I can imagine using a Macintosh, where the keyboard can be put on my lap, closing my eyes and just typing away. The computer automatically returns the carriage. The device is called "wraparound." You can rap nonstop. You don't have to worry about the typewriter ringing a little bell at the end of a line.

Experiment. Even try writing in a big drawing pad. It is true that the inside world creates the outside world, but the outside world and our tools also affect the way we form our thoughts. Try skywriting.

Choose your tools carefully, but not so carefully that you get uptight or spend more time at the stationery store than at your writing table.