



The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language

By Natalie Goldberg

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Sit. Walk. Write. These are the barest bones of Natalie Goldberg’s revolutionary writing and life practice, presented here in book form for the first time. *The True Secret of Writing* provides a whole new method of writing that Goldberg developed since the publication of her classic, *Writing Down the Bones*.

The capstone to forty years of teaching, *The True Secret of Writing* is Goldberg’s Zen boot camp. Stories of her own search for truth and clarity as well as her students’ breakthroughs and insights give moving testament to how brilliantly her unique, tough-love method works. As Goldberg says, “To write is to be empowered. . . . Writing is not just for someone who wants to write the great American novel.” Learning “the true secret” allows you to mine the rich awareness in your mind and to ground and empower yourself in a way that leads to deep, eloquent self-expression. Goldberg’s beautiful homages to the work of other great teachers and observers of mind, life, and love provide further secrets and inspiration to which you will return again and again.

In her inimitable way, Goldberg will inspire you to pick up the pen, get writing, and keep going. *The True Secret of Writing* helps you with your writing—and your life.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Many years ago my older brother gave me *Writing Down the Bones* with the inscription, 'So write already!' It was for me and for many readers a novel and fresh way to approach writing. I have delighted in Natalie's books ever since and in her method, having had the chance to see her at work in Taos. *The True Secret of Writing* is a rich voyage, a priceless distillation of her accumulated wisdom and experience as a writer, coach, and instructor on mindfulness. This lovely volume will have a permanent place on my writing shelf." (Abraham Verghese, author of *Cutting for Stone*)

"Heartfelt, funny, wise, pleading, calm, and ferocious, Natalie just makes you want to write!" (Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart*)

"Natalie Goldberg has done the unthinkable, she has shared the secret teaching. The buddhas of time immemorial are rejoicing and the literary bodhisattvas are smiling in silent approval. Read this book, then write a revolutionary manifesto!" (Noah Levine, author of *Dharma Punx*)

"Beautifully written, informative, intriguing, and passionate, *The True Secret of Writing* is a book to be appreciated, read, and reread by the beginning writer as well as the published professional. Natalie captures the pulse and spirit of the writing life with pristine clarity." (Lee Gutkind, Editor, *Creative Nonfiction*, Author of *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*)

"A uniquely delivered Eastern Zen approach to writing....A pleasantly meditative intuitive writing guide." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"A fresh practice for writing... rooted in the Zen tradition." -- *Shambhala Sun* (---)

"Goldberg's observations — and guidance on how to conduct a sit, walk, write workshop on your own (with as few as two people) — are inspiring. Readers will be eager to find a café or a quiet room and get down to the business of knowing their writing, and by doing so knowing themselves more deeply." (*Santa Fe New Mexican*)

"Goldberg does everything she can to get across what needs to be conveyed to others. Time and mortality perfume her writing, as well as the sweetest kind of perseverance, not just with teaching but with life itself. As I read, I kept thinking of the old Chan teachers: 'If you didn't get it that way, what about this? Or this? Or this?' That bottomless generosity flows through Goldberg's instruction even during the times of doubt." (Joan Sutherland)

"This is Goldberg at her quintessential best, sharing her deep personal history and lifelong experience with writing and teaching... Goldberg doesn't shy away from the human condition...urges the writer to use all this as fodder... Again and again she pins the reader in the moment with sensuous details of the physical world... She showers us with a cornucopia of words that all point to one essential thing: the silence out of which they were born..." (*Book Chat*)

About the Author

Natalie Goldberg is a poet, painter, teacher, and the author of twelve books, including her classic, *Writing*

Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within (which has sold more than 1.5 million copies) and *Old Friend from Far Away: The Practice of Writing Memoir*. She has been teaching seminars for thirty-five years to people from around the world and lives in New Mexico.

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True Secret of Writing

Introduction



A DECADE AGO, when I initially came up with the title “The True Secret of Writing,” it was a bit tongue-in-cheek. I’ve used that phrase when a student has come late to class: “Oh, Sheila, I’m so sorry. You just missed it—a moment ago I told the students the true secret of writing. I am only able to utter it every five years or so.” I’m teasing, but it gets the point across—be on time. This is your moment. Don’t miss it.

Of course, no one possesses the one single true secret. If someone says he does, run for the hills. It’s a dangerous idea. Life is not a commodity and is not singular but full of diversity.

For the past twelve years I have held weeklong retreats at the Mabel Dodge Luhan House in Taos, New Mexico, titled “The True Secret,” where we practice sitting meditation, slow walking, and writing throughout the day. People come because they want to write, but over the years I’ve realized that it’s not just writing that they want. They want connection; a spiritual longing drives them, a groping for meaning. Maybe they once read a single book—*Diary of Anne Frank*, *Leaving Cheyenne*, *The Brothers Karamazov*—that shattered them and they can’t forget it. Or they desire to speak the truth to their fathers. They want this connection through language, through words on a page. Other methods exist—tai chi, yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, retreats in nature—but their yearning manifests through writing. It also encompasses something larger than writing—after all, they could have gone to a creative writing program that so many colleges and universities offer.

I’ve extended these retreats to other places, Omega Institute in New York, Hollyhock in Canada, Upaya Zen Center and Vallecitos Mountain Refuge in New Mexico—under different titles. But the ones at Mabel’s are the model, my base for experiment, my home lab.

Over these many continuous years a rhythm has been established at Mabel’s and, with this repetition, I have been able to study the mechanical bones that best make up the week. The structure is easily applicable in other situations: to one full day, an hour in a public school class, or an afternoon at home. Individuals or a group of even two or three people can use it. Ultimately, you want to internalize this structure, so you carry it inside you, as a way to sustain and connect with your life.

I have been a Zen practitioner for many years so I naturally modified and modeled the writing retreats from the basic structure of formal Zen retreats. The True Secret is backed by a two-thousand-year-old tradition of practice. It is not simply a creative idea that Natalie, an individual, came up with willy-nilly. It’s the practice of a Western woman in her time and culture meeting head-on the masterminds of ancient Eastern Zen wisdom. And voilà—something fresh, yet rooted, has evolved.

Make no mistake: the practice in this book is not limited to any sect or religion or creative urge. It’s for everyone, and it can feed and enrich whatever religion, occupation, bent of mind, or situation you find

yourself in.

The one important element that I have added to a traditional meditation retreat is writing. Thus, sitting, walking, writing, are all moments of practice. The quietest, deepest sits I've experienced have included writing. The writing helps to empty and settle the mind. We then can sink into a quiet pool, into silence, out of which all of those tumultuous thoughts were created in the first place.

In True Secret retreats, we do timed writings as an equal practice to sitting and slow walking. The bell rings, we sit; another bell rings, we walk; a third bell, the students pull out their pens and notebooks from under their mats and accept their minds as it comes to them on the page. The bell rings again and they read aloud what they have written. Another bell, they do slow walking again.

The classroom is set up as a zendo (a place to sit) with cushions (or chairs) lined along the four walls and an altar in one corner. (You could use chairs in rows if there are a lot of students and, of course, an altar is not necessary.) But whatever the form, "structure" is the *modus operandi*. If you have a good structure, you make room for the mind to drop deeper, the breath deeper, the writing deeper.

"Anchor your mind with your breath," I repeat to the students. Then, I ask, "And how do we anchor the mind in writing?"

"With pen on paper," they answer. And then, they always ask the question: "What about computers?"

"Even though we can drive, we have to continue to remember how to walk." I answer, "A computer is fine, only it's a different physical activity. A slightly different bent of mind comes out. Not better or worse. Just different."

Handwriting is the first physical way we learned to write. Hand connected to arm, to shoulder, to heart. A computer is a two-handed activity. A different structure. For many people now it is the main writing tool. That's okay, but what if we grow poor and can't afford a computer anymore? Or our electricity gets cut off? This retreat is a training to write and reflect under all circumstances. When we are not always reliant on outside tools, we have a flexibility and freedom.

The meditation retreats of the seventies and eighties did not include writing practice. As many of us sat still, we played out over and over in our minds an upcoming wedding, a lost love, economic worries, raging sexual desire, a recent death. These were true concerns, but we couldn't stop the compulsive repetition of thoughts. Coming back to our breath as a way to return to the present moment was often inadequate and we sat consumed by emotional scenarios of grief, hunger, anger, desire, regret, and resentment. Even though the idea behind sitting is to finally let go of thoughts, to stop burning in hell, often the sitting only aroused and increased our internal aggression, with no relief. A few determined souls managed to rip through their thoughts, but a lot of us continued to boil. Others just checked out and fell asleep on the meditation cushion.

Oddly, I still have great respect for this method. It was a great opening, our first meeting with the ancient monastic life of China and Japan. Though I never attained eternal peace from thoughts (which actually would be a misunderstanding of mind), I learned to sit still (a huge accomplishment in our fast society) and through that to receive and listen deeply, not only to a movie or song but also to hear the trees grow and be enfolded in silence. I learned structure—of a room, of a day, of a week, of time, and of the mind. And I learned about an intimacy in moment-to-moment life, a love I never knew possible and a larger vision of human reality.

The sixties generation, my generation, was willing to drop out of society and live extreme lives until we tore

through to some raw truth, some hope of saving ourselves—and all sentient beings. This determined willingness of our generation helped to plant the dharma, the ground of reality, in America. A few rounded a corner, became priests, and made Zen into a career. But many of us spent years on the cushion as lay students until we were finally tossed out into the world, wondering what we'd been doing and what we should do now. Many felt the anxiety and stress of simply figuring out how to earn a living.

Since then the life of practice has changed. People are no longer willing to be so extreme. They demand a more integrative approach that includes work in the world, family life, and the new understandings in mind science and psychology. Writing practice offers just that. Including writing practice in your daily life cuts through repetitious, obsessive thinking. Writing down those scenarios, pouring out your immediate thoughts on the page, either wipes them out—they're said, done, expressed—or helps you to make sense of them, integrating them into your synapses and muscles.

Right after we write in retreat, we read aloud our pieces with no editing or comments. People are always allowed to take a pass on reading their writing, but as the engine of accepting the mind roars louder, almost no one passes. They feel too much exhilaration in the freedom from the critic or editor, or what I call monkey mind, that mind that jumps around and never lands.

"When we listen to each other read, we are studying mind. Not good or bad," I say. We get to hear the burning, roving thoughts of the people we are sitting with. Reading and listening brings us out of ourselves and we feel relief. We are not crazy. Others have all these wild thoughts, too. Sharing opens compassion and alleviates isolation. I am not alone.

In these retreats a person is backed into a larger world. You enter a larger mind as you bend over your notebook. Backed into a connection with all things, a glimpse at love through sorrow, through a glint off a glass or a step on gravel.

I uphold a different form of writing—a priori writing—before novels, short stories, essays, memoir. Writing practice grows strong spines, a confidence in your experience, a belief that your life is valuable (and through that a recognition of all life), an understanding of the mind, a writer's most potent tool, and also an understanding of practice—how one creates. Not only do we do a retreat schedule, but we also sign up for jobs: sweeping the porch, filling water pitchers, ringing bells, lighting candles for the three sessions a day. We ground ourselves in the physical care of our environment.

Did I mention the retreats are in silence? Ten years ago silence was quite a gnarly subject: people were aghast at the idea. Now it's been around and talked about, if not practiced.

I tell the students, "Don't throw it all away with yada yada—talk, talk, talk. Hold your stories in your belly. Pour them onto the page. Later you can talk. Don't diffuse your energy."

Four years ago, at dinner on the first night of a retreat, before we were to go into silence the next day, a student was laying out, scene by scene, a play he planned to write, to three other students sitting around him. I knew he hadn't written a word of it yet. I could tell because if he had he wouldn't have been expounding on it.

I leaned over, fork in hand, and said with a smile, "Matthew, shut up."

He was an old student who'd been coming to Mabel's from New Hampshire for years.

He was startled, then embarrassed, and then laughed.

“They are all going to steal your great idea.” I put some lettuce in my mouth.

After students have attended a silent retreat, they say they will never go back to the workshops where students speak the whole time.

In the True Secret Retreats, we are silent during meals and breaks and mornings and evenings. The exception is when we read our writing aloud or have book discussions. I always assign two or three books for the students to read before they arrive for the week, among them *Crossing to Safety*, by Wallace Stegner; *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe; *Heat*, by Bill Buford; *The Florist’s Daughter*, by Patricia Hampl; *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, by Anne Fadiman; *Native Speaker*, by Chang-Rae Lee; *Brothers and Keepers*, by John Edgar Wideman. I have them read books because I want our practice of awareness to meet the world.

Literature tells us something real about our lives and reveals an aspect of awake, alive mind. My Zen teacher, Katagiri Roshi, once said, “Literature can tell the truth about life, but it can’t tell you what to do about it.” Practice roots itself in our actual suffering, in the bones of our writing, expressing our genuine life force. It does not need to be a magic perfect island of formal bowing and Japanese decorum and aesthetics.

When the students read *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, by John Lewis, I asked them why we’d read it before this retreat.

Nathaniel from Massachusetts responded, “Because Lewis and the other civil rights activists are sitting and walking, like us. They give us an example of how to do it in the world.”



On one particular August retreat on the last afternoon, we carpooled, keeping silence (though one car out of the eight sang gospel as they drove), passing sunflowers bobbing their heads along the two-lane highway, passing Herb’s Lounge, making a left over the bridge, following a dirt road along the Hondo River where it meets the Rio Grande in the ancient pink-cliffed gorge. We went there to swim, running upstream along the bank, then floating on our backs down with the current.

Some had never been in a live river. Three students had learned to swim, nervously anticipating this trip. They were more reluctant at first in new bathing suits (one is English and called hers a bathing costume).

The day before, it had rained hard, a summer monsoon in late afternoon, and the river was now ice cold. But practice cut through resistance. We didn’t think. We dived in.

After days of silent practice we experience each other more deeply. No busy words block our connection in the river. We can feel the new swimmers’ glee and pride as they float feetfirst. And we take pleasure in their pleasure. Our minds are soft enough to include the high blue sky, the crisp rippling water, the swallows’ nests hanging under a rock ledge, and the cedars along the shore. At this point in the week, practice resonates throughout our bodies and makes room to receive what is around us.

Driving back I thought, No one else is doing this—so intricately interweaving the practice of sitting and walking with writing, with literature. Some teachers are now adding a few sessions of writing in meditation retreats but the writing is still considered a separate activity. Not integral to the practice.

I've dedicated my life to this writing practice. Looking back at the long line of cars driving on the crooked dirt road out of the gorge, I realized that I needed to share these retreats—and the next phrase came, “before I die.” I feel an urgency. How can I help, knowing impermanence is at my back? What trace of this wild and woolly life—before cell phones, text messaging, fax, iPhones, Facebook—can I leave?

The structure in this book extends the practice from ten-minute timed writings I have taught for years into all the time in which you also live outside the notebook. But that time in the notebook creates an enduring power. To find your writer's voice is to find your spine; it is to connect your breath of inspiration with the world's breath.

Sometimes, I admit, I am hesitant to share: I feel half begrudging—“let them sit long hours like I did”—and half “I am afraid of watering down the teachings,” of creating an easy American hit before students move on to something else. But I've found out that that isn't a fair assessment. It has been twenty-five years since my first book, *Writing Down the Bones*, came out and people continue to persevere with writing practice. Frankly, it has surprised and impressed me. Twenty years after the first workshops, students tell me they've had writing groups going all this time.

My job has been to take the ancient teachings and make them relevant. I have not diluted them but put them in an applicable form for our current life by putting writing into the heart of the practice. It's how I can best honor those years in the zendo in Minnesota with my Japanese teacher—and many weeks of practice I did in other lineages from Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma.

Something stays alive because it can adjust, flex with the times. It also stays alive if it touches something elemental, essential in our minds.

Really there is no Zen. I use Zen as an excuse, an angle, a good structure that helps to expose the human heart, that big body of an undefined country. We all have an innate intelligence. How can we uncover it? Believe in it? Care about something as ephemeral as peace and make it our goal? To settle into the bosom of the world and watch dark and light play out—and as my old teacher Katagiri Roshi used to say, “not be tossed away,” to record it all on the page.

This book is Zen and not Zen. It is lay Zen; sitting and then stepping out into the suffering of the world—of Auschwitz, the Congo, Native Americans, your friends and family. It is also catching a taste of the joy—and lucky fun—that are possible.

A recent letter from a student summarizes the effect of practicing sitting and walking in order to create a solid foundation for the writing: “Once in a while I remember wading into the cold water, then finally plunging all the way into the Rio Grande, and I am reminded to dive into my notebook and keep going—like with the current—and as in meditation—to get to that space in my writing beyond monkey mind. I know the important part is to keep showing up, not the ‘where’ I get to. To slow walk, to keep meditation practice. Most of all I am reminded to let go. To let go of self-judgment. All people have something of value to voice.” Sit. Walk. Write. That's the true secret.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Wanda Matthews:

Book is actually written, printed, or descriptive for everything. You can recognize everything you want by a

publication. Book has a different type. As you may know that book is important matter to bring us around the world. Alongside that you can your reading proficiency was fluently. A publication The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language will make you to be smarter. You can feel considerably more confidence if you can know about anything. But some of you think which open or reading the book make you bored. It's not make you fun. Why they can be thought like that? Have you searching for best book or suited book with you?

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Hey guys, do you wishes to finds a new book to learn? May be the book with the concept The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language suitable to you? The book was written by well-known writer in this era. The book untitled The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language is one of several books in which everyone read now. This kind of book was inspired a lot of people in the world. When you read this reserve you will enter the new dimensions that you ever know before. The author explained their concept in the simple way, thus all of people can easily to recognise the core of this guide. This book will give you a great deal of information about this world now. In order to see the represented of the world with this book.

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Juan Crowe:

In this particular era which is the greater person or who has ability in doing something more are more valuable than other. Do you want to become one of it? It is just simple strategy to have that. What you must do is just spending your time not very much but quite enough to possess a look at some books. One of several books in the top checklist in your reading list is The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language. This book which can be qualified as The Hungry Hillside can get you closer in growing to be precious person. By looking up and review this publication you can get many advantages.

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