

Excerpts from Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones and Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life.*

The other half of writing is reading. If you want to write, read; read a lot of books, but tell your own story. Remember, all the reader wants is to know the author better. We are not writing—our writing is a moment living through us. Anything you do deeply is very lonely, but it is just loneliness. No one cares that much whether you write or not; write because you want to. Hemingway said you have to be willing to give it as long as it takes. You fit into it; it doesn't fit neatly into your life. It makes you wild.

Our "monkey mind" says we can't write, we're no good, we're failures, fools for even picking up a pen; we listen to it. We drift. We listen and get tossed away. Meanwhile, wild mind surrounds us—sink into the big sky and write from there, let everything run through us and grab as much as we can of it with a pen and paper. This is all about a loss of control. Monkey mind scrambles for territory: "You're a bad writer, boring, stupid, incompetent." You don't know what you wrote until a few weeks later, when you have some distance. (We don't see that we're already Buddha.) Turn around and catch the goodness in yourself.

Some key guidelines:

- Keep your hand moving.
- Lose control.
- Be specific.
- Don't think—get below discursive thought to the place where your mind is original, fresh.
- Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar.
- You are free to write the worst junk in America.
- Go for the jugular.

Other thoughts:

- 1) A way to develop your writing skills and free yourself up is to engage in 10-minute "writing practice" sessions, using the above guidelines. Some examples of starter thoughts for these 10-minute sessions: I'm thinking of...I'm not thinking of...I know...I don't know...I am...I am not...I want...I don't want...I feel...I don't feel...
- 2) Find a sentence you like that comes from you, feel its integrity. Just lay down the next line and the next, one line at a time. Let the structure unfold. Find the quiet place (slow down).
- 3) Take a subject that's hard for you to write about, and write about it. Write slowly, evenly, and in a measured way. Continue to work on it every day until it's finished.
- 4) Write every day for ten days in a row—do not reread until two weeks later. Then read with a soft heart. Underline sentences that stand out and use them as first lines for future practice. Develop not by editing but by re-entering writing practice. Be brave, let some good writing go. Writing is the crack through which you crawl into your wild mind.
- 5) Make a writing schedule for a week and stick to it. Arrange to write in company with somebody else. Read it aloud. At first it's scary. Writing is a democratic act; don't think you have to write with someone great. Just get another body and get going.
- 6) Begin with, "I want to write about..." and go (be specific and concrete)... "I don't want to write about..." (put the rebellion in your writing rather than rebelling against it). Try writing about painting, politics, people you've known, animals, cars, summer, places you've never been. What are you numb to or want to avoid? Write about it.
- 7) Drink a full glass of water, slowly and continuously; list 5-10 subjects to write about. Take a slow walk down the block and notice where red is; now list things you want to write about. Don't expect your list to interest you when you sit down to write. You have to cut through. No topic is perfect. Keep it all, accept your mind. Don't think, don't cross out.

- 8) Go back to the summer before eighth grade and write about it, only this time tell the truth.
- 9) In the middle of something, write, "What I really want to say is..."
- 10) If you find yourself killing an inspiration by reworking, give it up—another will come. When you get a flash, abandon the idea and let it flow (don't try to control it).
- 11) Do a 10-minute writing with each sentence a different topic. Cut up old poems, journal entries, etc. and rearrange them with lines from magazines, the Yellow Pages, etc.
- 12) Write about home but not about any house or apartment you lived in or street or town or city. Write about the place you were brought up in. Be true, not sentimental. Try to write from a different angle—a dog's view, your aunt's, etc.
- 13) Apply what you know (tennis, marketing, Chinese philosophy) to your writing. Do that discipline first, then launch into writing. Then try the opposite.
- 14) When you wake up and before you go to sleep, say, "I am a writer."
- 15) Write about what you will miss when you die. Things only you know about that will die with you. Get dumb—don't take things for granted. Write everything you know about dying.
- 16) Sit down with a plan to write something you have always wanted to write and write it through, no matter how long it takes.
- 17) Make contact with a writer (doesn't have to be published). Go to a writer's workshop. Seek out people who love writing.
- 18) Have waking daydreams. Write the dream of a friend, lover, someone you know and begin it with "I am..."
- 19) Write about a time when you had magical powers. Who are your angels? Name them all.
- 20) List five abstract statements. Back each one up with at least a paragraph of solid, concrete details. Now switch, start with detail and then leap into a cosmic statement.

Other thoughts:

- Poetry is a dumb Buddha who thinks a donkey is as important as a diamond. Denial, repression, all those psychological adaptations we developed in childhood were ways of not being there, because being there was too painful. Writing demands that we cut through and be where we are, like a cat gripping the side of a cement wall at the top of a ten-story building—stay there and look around and not blank out because it is too hard. If you learn what is in the present moment you can transport it.
- Procrastination is putting off; writing is something full-bodied (pregnant)—you are letting writing work on you... know the difference between procrastination and pregnancy.
- The chapter should move the question forward; ask, "What is the question?"
- A story is: "The King died, the Queen died." A plot is: "The King died, the Queen died of grief." Plot is about cause and effect, about Karma. If something happens, there is a result.
- The essential ingredient of writing is laziness. Just stop. Don't go anyplace else. Lie around for the rest of the day. After you're cleared... your desire to write will rise up... you will not be trying to prove yourself. Put aside a day a month to do nothing. At the end of the day, sidle over to your note-book, but only if you feel like it, and write.
- Do not freeze with your work. After you have finished a piece of work, the work is then none of your business. Go on and do something else.