Encountering Natalie: Five Days with a Writing Guru

BY FRAN SIMONE

“It’s great workshop, I’ve been three times, and this year Natalie Goldberg is the keynoter,” says Paula, friend, colleague, and teacher consultant.

“I’ll think about it,” I answer.

I know that Natalie Goldberg’s book Writing Down The Bones has been profitably used as inspiration and guide for teacher-writers at summer institutes all over the country. Working with Natalie, I think, might be a special experience.

Two months later, on a hot August day, I drive from the West Virginia mountains to flat fields of ripe corn, and arrive in Yellow Springs, Ohio, for the Antioch Writers Workshop. Armed with my worn-out copy of Writing Down the Bones, I am looking forward to a week of writing practice. That evening at the opening banquet, new and old timers chat: “Is this your first time? What’s Natalie like?” Then we file into a hot auditorium for the main event: a talk by Natalie herself.

During her keynote speech, “Thunder and Lightening,” Natalie talks about her love for the Midwest and for Ohio, with its big sky and ripe corn fields that whisper in the wind. Next comes a few remarks about monkey mind, a concept she learned from her Buddhist teacher, Katagiri Roshi. “Don’t let monkey mind get in your way,” she says. I think about the monkey on the back of my own prose, that sledgehammer which hacks away at almost everything I write.

“Write regularly . . . schedule an appointment with yourself on your calendar and don’t break it,” Natalie advises.

The next day we settle into the week’s routine: morning workshops led by facilitators other than Natalie in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Natalie herself comes on board from 11 to noon. She says, “Don’t take notes.” No notes? Like one of Pavlov’s dogs, when I hear a lecture, I take notes. How will I remember anything? We begin writing practice with a 10-minute warm-up and a warning: “Don’t cross out,” Natalie instructs. No notes, no crossing out. Natalie is a fierce Zen master, an uncompromising drill sergeant—or perhaps she is merely a former public school teacher.

First free write: “I remember...” Among other things, I remember the white lace dress I wore to my high school senior prom, the time George Krotseries gave me a bottle of Blue Watz perfume (my first), the smell of my grandmother’s roses, my husband’s touch, random phone numbers, and my father’s voice. Not exactly Pulitzer caliber here.

We play with other topics during writing practice: I’m thinking of... not thinking of... looking at... not looking at... I know... don’t know... want... don’t want. At this point, I’m wondering if writing practice is for me. I recall a statement made by summer fellow Marsha Bishop on the first day of our last summer institute, “I want to do the real thing, not the superficial stuff that any teacher can whip up in five minutes.”

I too want to do the real thing, and the writing I have generated so far seems to me pretty superficial.

But since I usually do as I’m told, and since I know that the superficial can sometime generate the real thing, my Bic fast forwards on the blank lines of my notebook. After ten minutes, some participants read. Natalie does not comment; instead she asks us to recall,
“Say out loud any words, phrases, sentences from your writing that you remember.” Unfortunately, I remember none. “Listen to the mind, and the way the mind moves,” says Natalie. Apparently my mind is immobile.

Day two: Natalie says, “If you have a relationship with your mind, you can go anywhere.” I like a sneaky child, I write this in my notebook. “If you're stuck, start with what’s in front of your face.” What’s in front of my face is Natalie, short black hair, dark eyes, and smooth skin, standing behind a lectern on a raised platform in the front of a lecture hall, wearing a short, black cotton dress covered with white half-moons the size of my fist. But it’s difficult to focus on what’s in front of me because what’s beneath me is the most uncomfortable chair in all of academia.

Later that day I try another “what’s in front of me” with my writing partner, Walter. Sitting on a stone step in the shaded oasis of the Glen Helen Nature Preserve, I write about cicadas buzzing, hot, humid air, pen moving over lined paper, and the stately trunks of tall oaks swaying in gentle wind. After twenty minutes I end with a wish: to stay present because there really isn't any other place to go. Walter reads, I read; breaking another of Natalie's rules, we cheat and talk about what we wrote. Then we drive downtown for a cappuccino at Dino's.

During the remainder of the week, we practice in Natalie's sessions and writing groups. Topics: a singular memory of sound, the sensation of cold, 1988, third grade, the color white, and flat. For ‘flat’ I write: like a pancake, like a tire, like a day old cola, like my chest, like the land in Ohio, like my son-in-law's Chicago dialect, like Barbie's tummy, like a straight line, like the world before Galileo, like how I'm feeling about writing this. I end with: This is crap; this isn't going anywhere, I hate this, I want my partner to call time so I can stop because I'm flat out of words.

This daily routine continues. Natalie calls out a topic and then says, “Give me twenty minutes on what has broken you. Go.” “Give me ten minutes on sixth grade. Go.” We write, she writes, we recall, and Natalie does not comment. Instead, Natalie wants to know more: she wants to know what you would have done if you could have. She wants to know about a first time.

In addition to writing practice, Natalie talks about her parents, Ohio (until someone points out that most of the audience aren’t Buckeyes), sitting zazen, and wild and monkey mind. One day, she says, “You don't know me even though you've read my books.” Shortly before a lunch break, she announces, “I'm only one person, I can't have lunch with all of you.” I'm not asking for a lunch date, but I am hoping Natalie will have time to autograph the copy of Bones I bought for my niece, Alicia.

In another session Natalie asks us to “list four concrete nouns and then write about your mother.” My list: scenery, paradise, boat, glacier.

Mom's idea of paradise was turning the thermostat up to 90 degrees during New York winters. My mom and dad argued over heat. “Chris, it's too damn hot in this house,” he said as he sweated in his tee shirt, smoking Chesterfields and reading the Daily Racing Form. Sometimes she ignored him, or suggested he open a window. On the few occasions when dad persisted, mom turned down the thermostat to a chilly 82. The blood in my mother's veins ran cold like a glacier; in my father's it flowed hot like a volcano (cliche, cliché). When I watched the scene from Titanic where hundreds of panicked passengers float in freezing water near the sinking boat, I thought of my
Writing with Natalie

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mom’s icy body and warm soul. Her warm soul, now resting in heaven’s greenhouse.

Not bad for a free-write, I think. A bit superficial for now, but it just might become the real thing. Then others read longer, stronger pieces and my monkey mind mangles my mommy paragraph. Short, trite, dull, stupid, boring. “You have to write a lot of crap,” Natalie repeats throughout the week.

“Share yours,” someone shouts. Hesitantly, Natalie obliges. At the end, she says, “It’s pretty crappy,” practicing what she preaches.

One morning a flamboyant middle-aged redhead reads her ten minute piece in a Bette Davis voice. Her story involves visiting the Parthenon in Greece on a moonlit night, feeling the caress of a lover in Venice while riding in a gondola, walking down cobblestone stairs toward ancient ruins, basking in the beauty of Florence, and later burying her only son back in the states. Sentence piles on sentence, like a wedding cake decorated with strong verbs and concrete images. Pleasure, pain, and pathos gift-wrapped into a ten minute package. My new friend Lucy from Santa Monica rolls her eyes and whispers, “There’s no way she could have written that in ten minutes.”

“Well it ain’t crap.” I reply. Beware of monkey mind.

Most of what Natalie shares appears in Writing Down the Bones and Wild Mind. “Listen to how the mind moves; practice — it’s not about being good; grab first thoughts; listen deeply; cultivate writing friends; clear the mind; face the unknown; and feed your right brain.”

My writing group retreats to the New Jersey Dairy next to the Udders and Putters miniature golf course where we gossip. The reviews of Natalie are not all positive.

“She has too much of an attitude,” one brassy New Yorker says.

“I think she’s been doing this too long,” adds another.

My California friend observes, “I didn’t come from the west coast and pay almost $1,000 to hear her say we don’t know her, she can’t have lunch with all of us, and unless we spend two years in writing practice we can’t produce anything worthwhile.”

I am a bit more tolerant. Since a fierce inner critic distracts me, battling monkey mind and scribbling first thoughts can be useful. But I can’t imagine spending two years mucking around with writing practice as Natalie suggests. Why watch only previews and miss the main feature?

On the last day Natalie announces that she is burnt out, an observation that confirms some of the reviews of my colleagues. She says that she plans a two year sabbatical from writing and teaching. During that time, she says, she’ll plunge more deeply into her Zen practice and also paint. In her book The Long Quiet Highway, when Natalie struggles with a difficult decision, Roshi says, “It’s okay to do nothing.”

Postscript: A month later, in September Natalie is not so much into nothingness that she has forgotten us. An email appears from the Antioch workshop director with a note from Natalie in Taos: “Remember: Continue under all circumstances. Don’t get tossed away. And let yourself want it bad. No dodging; just enduring.”

And I endure. The superficial may yet metamorphose into the real thing.