

BOOK REVIEW by Ellen Ryan  
Writing Aging and Spirit: [www.writingdownouryears.ca](http://www.writingdownouryears.ca)  
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## **THE TRUE SECRET OF WRITING: CONNECTING LIFE WITH LANGUAGE.**

Natalie Goldberg

New York: Atria Books/Simon & Schuster, 2013. 236pp. \$28.99CAD

*To find your writer's voice is to find your spine;  
It is to connect your breath of inspiration with the world's breath.*

Natalie Goldberg's *True Secret of Writing* invites those who meditate to write and those who write to meditate.

From a Zen perspective, daily mindfulness practice is a true secret of living, and periodic intensive silent retreats build regular practice. Here, we learn how writing deepens mindfulness practice and how intensive writing workshops emerge from traditional meditation retreats.

Many reader/writers acclaim Goldberg's 1986 classic inspiration *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. My own creative writing burst forth in the mid-90s after I set up the discipline of regularly visiting a coffee shop to read one of the book's short essays and to march through the 10-minute timed writings.

In the current book, Goldberg presents the rationale, structure, and content of the writing mindfulness retreats she has offered regularly for more than 25 years. She encourages readers to shape their own mindful writing practice and also to model writing group activities around the components she describes.

Natalie quickly creates an intimate relationship with readers – we definitely feel we are on a first-name basis. We become companions on her colourful, meandering path through workshop after workshop, sharing her surprises and insights. All of life is grist for the writing mill, as she demonstrates creatively in telling anecdotes. She regales us, for example, with the story of how she led a writing group out for a walk onto a New Mexico mesa at dusk, only to feel the way home suddenly hidden by complete darkness. She recounts how a participant saved them all from her lack of preparedness by indicating that a full moon should rise within an hour. Natalie lined up the participants, close but not touching, to wait silently in the proposed direction for the lamp which eventually came to light their way.

Monkey mind is a challenge to many who try to practice meditation. Natalie uses timed fast writing with pen and paper kept beside the meditation cushion or chair to dump thoughts jangling through the mind [when trying to come to stillness]. Writing serves as another way to watch our mind. Sitting can then be a calmer experience. Slow walking

fits in the sequence, as keen attention to feet on the floor while breathing grounds the mind. Writing, in turn, goes deeper after sitting and walking within silence.

Fast writing involves writing without lifting the pen, trying to squeeze past our editorial, criticizing mind. We write concretely – ‘sycamore’ rather than ‘tree’, ‘ramble’ or ‘race’ instead of ‘go’. We try to use all the senses, or at least expand the senses beyond the visual. We write until the bell rings, sometimes writing “I can’t think of what to write” or rewriting the exercise statement (e.g., “What I really want to write about the streets I’ve lived on is ...”).

In a writing mindfulness group, repeatedly reading aloud the fast writings within an otherwise silent setting begins to focus the mind. Writing, then, is the only deep communication. We learn to write all the superficial words and through all the distractions so that we can find what we really want to say. Talking about what we want to write will not get us there. We also learn to listen without judgment to the superficial and significant thoughts of others reading what they have just written – we give the gift of our attention.

Natalie offers stories about how specific writing exercises have worked with different writing groups, including excerpts from group participants’ efforts. She illustrates ways of widening the exercise as the need arises.

For cultivating mindfulness, I found her cumulative lists particularly useful. She suggests we list our goodbyes – quickly writing brief descriptions of saying goodbye to parents at the beginning of university or before moving abroad, to friends, relatives, for short or long periods as well as saying goodbye to loved ones who have died. And then a list of our first meetings – people, places, events, activities, things (such as first car or home where we live now). And then a list of moments when we have received a special insight, felt touched by the divine. Finally, she suggests that we hold on to these lists, adding to them over time. On occasion, we can review our lists and find one item to expand upon for 10 or 20 or 30 minutes fast writing. Repeated fast writings on these themes take us deeper into the meaning of our lives and increase our awareness of endings, beginnings, and inspirations as they happen.

As with other practice, Natalie argues passionately that commitment is a key. For writing to become a part of our mindfulness practice, we need to create a discipline by making a plan, keeping track and revising the plan as needed. For example, I could set the intention to write for 20 minutes in my journal five days a week for six weeks. Even though I miss a few days in the first week, I can persevere with keeping track and aim to miss fewer days in future weeks. The main point is to ‘show up’ for the practice over and over again, to strengthen the ‘mindful writing’ muscles, to move toward ‘Writer’s Mind’. “Shut up and write!”