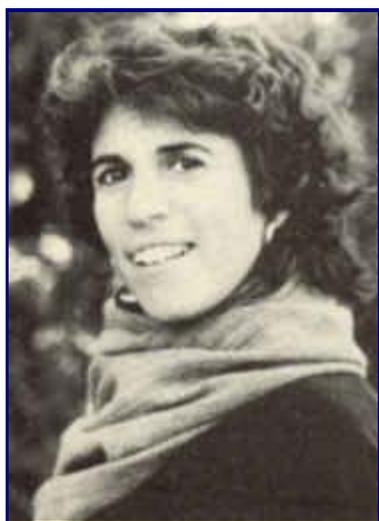


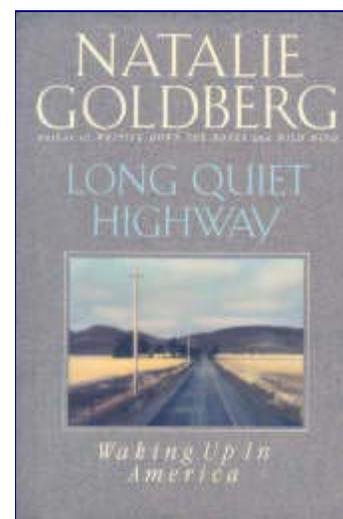
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Long Quiet Highway by **Natalie Goldberg**

Waking Up in America
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



Shortly after finishing a review of [Writing Down the Bones](#), an earlier book on writing by Natalie

Goldberg, I noticed a blurb in the Rudolf Steiner Library newsletter for this new book by her. In *Bones* she mentions Katagiri Roshi a couple of times, like when he suggested that she make writing her practice instead of sitting zazen, and she spends the rest of the book talking about how one does writing, how one becomes a writer, how one stays a writer. In *Highway* she inverts the process and devotes most of the book to Katagiri Roshi and a few passages to writing.

The metaphor of the Introduction covers the issue of how one stays a writer (or even becomes one in the first place).

[page ix] There is an order of Buddhist monks in Japan whose practice is running. They are called the marathon monks of Mount Hiei. They begin running at one-thirty A.M. and run from eighteen to twenty-five miles per night, covering several of Mount Hiei's most treacherous slopes. Because of the high altitude, Mount Hiei has long cold winters, and part of the mountain is called the Slope of Instant Sobriety; because it is so cold, it penetrates any kind of illusion or intoxication. The monks run all year round. They do not adjust their running schedule to the snow, wind, or ice. They wear white robes when they run, rather than the traditional Buddhist black. White is the color of death: There is always the chance of dying on the way. In fact, when they run they carry with them a sheathed knife and a rope to remind them to take their life by disembowling or hanging if they fail to complete their route.

One becomes a writer by writing every day. Getting up in the middle of the night and running one's fingers over the keyboard for 25 miles. Writing as you cover the dangerous slopes of your inner being. Writing in the high elevations of your soul as the years pass by. Writing as the freezing winds, snow, and ice buffet you. Writing into sobriety as the cold loneliness of the keyboard penetrates your every illusion. Writing with the white robe of Death over your shoulders as He waits for you along the way.

Metaphors are important to writers. The central metaphor embodied in the title of a book reveals a lot about the writer and the reason for the book, if one can ferret it out. Here is Natalie's:

[page xi] There is a proliferation of writing books in America. They are very popular. People would rather read about how to become a writer than read the actual products of

writing: poems, novels, short stories. Americans see writing as a way to break through their own inertia and become awake, to connect with their deepest values.

Yes, writing can do this for us, but becoming awake is not easy. One must be persistent under all circumstances and it is not always exciting. It is hard. It is a long quiet highway.

And she explains the metaphor a bit for readers who are uncomfortable sitting in new-fangled chairs and who want her point spelled out for them:

[page xiii] We, who are not marathon monks, wake up and have the toothbrush before us — brushing our teeth! the great ritual that gets us out of bed — and then we have the blank page in front of us, or the school bus, or the phone ringing. We all must go on down that highway. Our life is the path of learning, to wake up before we die. This book is about that.

At a Taos High School career day she was invited to give a talk. She began by saying, "I didn't know I'd be a writer. I was just bored." She told them about how Mr. Clemente, her high school English teacher, switched off the lights one afternoon in class and told them to listen to the rain. "That's all we had to do — listen to the rain. There wasn't a test or a quiz on rain, on listening, or on cloudy afternoons." Then she gave them a test — they all moaned — in which all the answers would be correct. She asked them to write each answer beginning with "I remember." As I perused her words, I took her test along with the Taos students. Here the questions followed by my answers. You, dear Reader, may take the test also. Be specific as to the person and the details of what you remember about them.

Your mother, aunt, or grandmother:

I remember my mother who liked to pour coffee milk over her hot grits and eat it with a spoon.

A memory of a sound:

I remember the house's window fan that was just over the head of our bed whirring and humming me and my three younger brothers to sleep every night.

A memory of the color red:

I remember a brand-new two-tone 1955 Ford Victoria convertible with white on the top of the chrome swoosh on the side and red below it.

A memory of last summer:

Walking in Kerr Creek and picking up cylindrical fossils newly washed down from the ridges on each side.

A time when you were lonely: **Just moved back to New Orleans at age 36, new job, no wife, no friends.**

At Boston University in graduate school, her professors were working writers who came in to teach her. One day a student read aloud a "truly terrible story." John Cheever stopped anyone else from saying anything about it. His answer reveals a distinction between process and content that a writer needs to pay attention to.

[page 18, 19] 'No, stop! This is the most boring story I have ever heard in my entire life. We are not going to examine it.' The student got defensive, 'Well, it's about the ennui of our society.' 'Yes,' Cheever said, 'the subject can be boredom, but the story can't be boring!'

One of the ways writers communicate without being boring is they pass along their breath as they write. On a process level, this is what informs inspirational writing — our breath matches the breath of the

author in the situation she is writing about. It is a form of immortality on Earth that writers attain if they are not boring. Natalie wrote about that aspect of Shelley's poems in *Bones*. Here she describes reading a poignant poem by Raymond Carver to her writing group in California.

[page 21, 22] My voice broke when I read this in class, as it did when I read aloud from Hugo. These writers were my friends and my teachers. They were farther along on the path. They guided me. I had never met either of them, but I loved them through their work. I explained to the class that often when you take on the voice of a great writer, speak his or her words aloud, you are taking on the voice of inspiration, you are breathing their breath at the moment of their heightened feelings, that all writers ultimately do is pass on their breath.

Neurosis is a struggle; few would quibble with that. It is a problem which besets us and we struggle to overcome it, over and over and over. That's what we want the problem to be: over.

In a battle with a neurosis, we are assured of losing because we are struggling with a part of ourselves that is stronger than we are. The best one can hope for is an extended end game if one keeps up the struggle. But there is another way, one that leads out of struggle to wisdom. One in which what vexes you the most becomes your guru.

[page 25] Tibetan Buddhists say that a person should never get rid of their negative energy, that negative energy transformed is the energy of enlightenment, and that the only difference between neurosis and wisdom is struggle. If we stop struggling and open up and accept what is, that neurotic energy naturally arises as wisdom, naturally informs us and becomes our teacher.

This passage helps to inform an insight in me as to the meaning of this otherwise inscrutable metaphor in the form of a [koan](#) from the *Gateless Gate*. When one is struggling, one is in the throes of a neurosis, whatever else is going on. During such a struggle, you are unable to perceive the Buddha nature in anyone or anything because it is not present in you. In the story below Joshu was obviously not struggling and demonstrated that immediately.

[page 146] In one lecture, Roshi told us a koan from the *Mumonkan* or *Gateless Gate*:

**One day a big congregation of monks had been arguing about Buddha nature. When Nansen heard them, he held a cat up in front of them.
"Does this cat have Buddha nature?" Nansen asked.
No one answered, so Nansen cut the cat in half.
That evening, Joshu returned and Nansen told him what had happened. Joshu put sandals on his head and walked out. Nansen said, "If you had been here, you could have saved the cat."**

Natalie felt utter desolation on a train ride and she decided to give up the struggle. She experienced a "transformation from neurosis to wisdom." She said, ". . . I wanted to survive — no, not just to survive, I wanted glory, I wanted to learn how to grow a rose out of a cement parking lot . . ." In other words, she wanted to go from "neuroses" to "new roses." And writing became her "vehicle for transformation." It can become yours, if you will, like Natalie, let go of the struggle and write on . . .

[page 31] I kept diving into the material of my childhood, and instead of drowning in it, I found a life saver: swimming with my pen.

Is it this easy? Just let go of the struggle and pick up your pen and move it across the page 25 miles every morning? No, there must be a fructification; before a plant can produce fruit, it must first begin as a tiny seed placed into fertile earthen soil, watered, and the light of the Sun must fall upon it. These are the

minimum requirements for a plant to grow to fructification. If the seed of a writer has been germinating in you as it did in Natalie, following her path may be very useful for you.

[page 34] This is important to understand. Real, solid growth and education are slow. Look at a tree. We don't put a seed in the ground and then stick our fingers in the earth and yank up an oak. Everything has its time and is nourished and fed with the rhythms of the sun and moon, the seasons. We are no different, no more special, no less important. We belong on the earth. We grow in the same way as a rock, a snail, a porpoise, or a blade of grass.

On page 35 she wrote a haiku, a short 17 syllable Japanese style poem using a computer to assist her. I've speculated on computer verse myself, thinking that while a computer might be able to write a poem, it will never be able to select a great poem; it cannot breathe and therefore cannot be inspired by poetry. Materialistic reductionists tend to forget the essence of what lives in us humans — our breath, placed there by the Divine Being in the beginning. Without breath we can create only the simulacra of human beings, not human beings. The haiku Natalie and the computer crafted was this:

**Spring.
The willows are green.
I am sad.**

[page 35] Actually the haiku I wrote wasn't awful. I've heard worse, but it had no human element. The real essence of a haiku is the poet's awakening, and the haiku gives you a taste of that, like a ripe red berry on the tip of your tongue. Your mind actually experiences a marvelous leap when you hear a haiku, and in the space of that leap you feel awe. Ahh, you say. You get it. The poet transmits her awakening.

Here's a haiku I penned in the margin in my attempt to understand the essence of a haiku as she described it above.

**A ripe red berry
Touches the tip of the tongue —
A poet awakes!**

Writers spend a lot of time alone, but are seldom lonely. If a writer feels lonely, a writer writes into that loneliness and out of it again. When one is successful, one feels like Natalie felt below, "This aloneness was good."

[page 37] I wrote my first real poem. I had never felt this way before. I looked up. The whole Saturday morning had passed. The shadows of the elms outside my window had shifted to the other side of the yard. This aloneness was good. I was a solitary human being, whole unto myself. This was sacred. It felt *so good*.

If you doubt that inspired writing changes the way you breathe, read this next piece of prose by Hemingway aloud and notice how you feel as you read it.

[page 31, 32] "On hot nights you can go to the Bambilla to sit and drink cider and dance and it is always cool when you stop dancing there in the leafyness of the long plantings of trees where the mist rises from the small river." (*Death in the Afternoon*, Scribners, 1932) Hemingway was breathing deep, long breaths to carry that sentence. . . . Where Hemingway talks about the Bambilla, he also talks about the Madrid climate, sleep, Constantinople, the Allied occupation, watching the sun rise, the stockyards burning in Chicago, and the Republican convention in Kansas City in 1928 — all in the same paragraph. He did not worry whether everything followed a topic sentence, as I was taught to write in junior high. Old Ernest went wherever his mind took him. And it

worked! I wanted that for myself; that was having a fist in my own life.

"Having a fist in my own life" made me think of being "fist deep in life" — like a baker bread might be fist deep in dough as while kneading it. This poem is my litany of the things into which one might get "fist deep" in one's life:

*Fist deep in bread dough
Fist deep in dishwater
Fist deep in garden soil
Fist deep in Life.*

*Fist deep in a novel
Fist deep in glowing words
Fist deep in a birthing cow
Fist deep in Life.*

*Fist deep in taffy
Fist deep in sawdust
Fist deep in blood and guts
Fist deep in Life.*

*Fist deep in problems
Fist deep in paperwork
Fist deep in a fight
Fist deep in Life.*

*Fist deep in chocolate
Fist deep in grapes
Fist deep in a beehive
Fist deep in Life.*

To earn a living in order to write, Natalie took her mother's advice and got a teaching certificate. She got a job teaching in Albuquerque, New Mexico, her first contract job as teacher. The previous teacher had fled for the hills exhausted by trying to keep order and teach these unruly kids that Natalie now had to face every day. One night she had put some eggs on the stove and the water boiled away and as she ran to the stove to turn the fire off, she bumped into the refrigerator door and the handle caught her in the chest. The next day in class her chest still hurt as she finished her yogurt at lunch and she waited for the bell to ring.

[page 58, 59] I stood up in the middle of "Please, please, be quiet," and suddenly stopped. The place where my chest was sore — it was opening, opening red and enormous like a great peony, and it was radiating throughout my body. I felt the blood flowing in my hands and legs. I turned and looked out the window. I looked at the smoky appearance of the spring cottonwoods near the parking lot. Any day now they would break into leaf. There was a spindly Russian olive near our window. Suddenly it looked beautiful. Then I had one simple vision: I saw myself wandering in autumn fields and I felt nothing, nothing else was important. This was a profound feeling, a big feeling. It wasn't a passing, momentary flash. I knew I had to stay true to that one vision.

She had no idea what had happened to her and had no one to share it with. She told a friend, "Gabrielle, my heart opened in front of the class. Nothing makes sense." And her friend said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Natalie comments about her friend, "She was an intellectual. She, too, had read Kant, Descartes, Henri Bergson, Aristotle. I hung up. None of my friends wanted to hear about it. They were all like the person I'd been before this afternoon in class: atheists, intellectuals." She began waking up in the middle of the night about 2 am staring at the clock. "My mind was totally blank."

[page 60] This waking up and staring in the middle of the night continued for three weeks. It became clear that I should quit my job and go to the mountains.

On Monday she walked into the principal's office and quit a job that still had two months to run on her contract, knowing in advance it meant that she would never get another job teaching. And yet when she left the principal's office, he told her to call him if she ever wanted another job. She had one week left with her unruly mob of kids and decided to let them do what they wanted for that last week. On Tuesday she took them outside the school on a long walk to an organic farm where the workers taught the kids about gardening. The next day, another outing.

[page 61] On Thursday it rained. The kids were dismayed. We wouldn't be able to leave the building.

"Nonsense," I said. "It's not cold out and it's not raining hard. Let's get very still." I waited for them to become very still and they did, unlike a few weeks ago. "When we go out and enter the rain, see if you can walk between the drops." I paused. "If we do get wet, don't worry — it's New Mexico!" In one enormous rush, I felt the whole glory of the state. "We'll dry quickly."

On Friday, her last day at school she stood in front of the blackboard and told her class it was to be her last day. She said that she knew it had been a tough year for them, but they hadn't been so well-behaved for either of their teachers.

[page 62, 62] "But this week was a great week." They all nodded. "I want you to remember it. It's important. All of you get in your seats" — they were leaning against bookshelves and sitting on top of desks — "and when you do, I want you to close your eyes and put out your hands." I walked around and placed a Hershey's Kiss in each kid's palm. "Now unwrap it, and all on the same count, when I say yes, put it on your tongue, close your eyes and your mouth, let it melt slowly, and remember this week. Promise to never forget it, no matter what else happens in your life." I switched off the classroom lights.

I felt sad and happy when I left that day. I had begun to redeem something from a long time ago, all that deadness I had felt as a child.

I had tears running down my eyes as I finished reading the story of the last days of her teaching job. She had learned her lesson well from Mr. Clemente — she had taken her class out to *feel* the rain as well as hear it and had ensured that they would remember that last week as she remembered the day in Mr. Clemente's class when he allowed her to listen to the rain. Still alone and lost, she drove to the Lama Foundation near Taos, begun by Ram Dass, and as she walked up the hill, about halfway up, she met a tall woman, nearly six feet, barefoot, wearing a long white robe, coming down the hill.

[page 63] "What are you doing here?" she asked bluntly.

I looked up. I clasped my hands to my breast. "The Garden of Eden opened up in my heart and I don't know what to do," I blurted out, earnestly.

"You must find a practice to water that garden," she said without missing a beat.

From that time on, Natalie was led to various practices until she ended up in Minneapolis married to Neil and studying with Katagiri Roshi who became her teacher that she talked about in *Bones*. Let's listen in on another Roshi that she studied:

[page 143] Suzuki Roshi once said about questioning our life, our purpose, "It's like putting a horse on top of a horse and then climbing on and trying to ride. Riding a horse by itself is hard enough. Why add another horse? Then it's impossible" We add that extra horse when we constantly question ourselves rather than just live out our lives, and be who we are at every moment.

Once she admitted having trouble understanding Katagiri Roshi and he told her, "If you want to find Buddha nature, love someone and care for them." She tells us that when Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, came over here to advocate a cease-fire in Vietnam people asked him if he came from the North or the South, "No," he said. "I'm from the center." That was how she experienced her Roshi: he came from the center, a very large place, "bigger than over here or over there." (Page 158)

She tells us that the only place in Santa Fe she felt comfortable writing was a full-meal restaurant called The Haven and there she ate the least expensive meal and wrote *Bones*. One day the owner came over to her and Natalie discovered that the owner and most of the cooks and waiters were Zen students. She continued to write there and took a job cooking there also. She hit a dry spell in her writing during which she felt like she had "a term paper due in school" and instead of writing she did other things. During this time, she got invited to go the Jazz Festival in New Orleans, and almost didn't go using the excuse that she was working on a book. But she wasn't working on a book, she was avoiding working on a book, so she went. This was sometime during the 1980s when my wife Del and I spent long days in the Gospel Tent at the Jazz Festival, a tent that literally rocked with gospel and soul and everyone stood and rocked along with the great throated singers up on the stage. We may have stood next to Natalie that year.

[page 187] We flew to Louisiana, and during the whole music festival I sat in the gospel tent, right up close to the stage. I couldn't believe the sound coming out from those Christian women, how a chest could be that big and open, and how huge a voice it could produce.

When she returned home, she wrote without stopping until the final page of *Bones* spilled out of her typewriter onto the floor.

There's much more to be savored in this book about "Waking up in America." If you are out on a long quiet highway and feeling a bit sleepy and unsure of where that highway is taking you, pull off the road for a few hours and read this book. You may find that the highway will never seem so lonely ever again.

