

The Great Spring: Writing, Zen, and This Zigzag Life

Natalie Goldberg

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A writing guru offers meditative reflections on her working life in this personable collection of vignettes.

In her collection of essays *The Great Spring*, Natalie Goldberg writes with honesty and intensity about her life and how it has shaped her own writing. Unlike her famous writing manual *Writing Down the Bones*, this series of meditative reflections is no instruction book; rather, it is a personal statement about why a person becomes a writer.

The essays are divided into five sections: searching, wandering, zigzagging, losing, and leaping. Some essays are part memoir; others resemble travel literature. Still others reveal Goldberg's naïveté and sense of recklessness. In each essay, she charms as she candidly reveals herself. The effect is quilt-like: one piece is often quite different from another, but the whole is a cohesive pleasure.

One unifying motif in the essays is her lifelong belief in the power of Zen Buddhism, and how the study and practice of Zen has influenced her writing. Goldberg says, "I was driven to write books in order to find my lost voice, to be seen by people who could not see me."

In several essays, Goldberg recalls moments of return, to find someone she has lost or to repair something that had been broken. She visits the Japanese burial temple of her Zen teacher and the empty Florida house of her mother. Both, in different ways, are in ruins, reflecting her sadness as she remembers relationships that disintegrated.

Her candidness and insight about the final reality of death, and the clarity with which she writes about it, transforms these essays into meditations. Her implied advice seems to run as "do as I do, not as I instruct." Goldberg writes, "What I have come to understand [is that] writing does not bring love."

Goldberg's second artistic bent is painting, and it has influenced her description of physical places: the dryness of Taos, New Mexico, the frost of Minneapolis, and the rains that deluge Japan breathe on the page. The cities that she has visited and the towns that she has called home come vividly alive.

These vignettes about Goldberg's life, and her life of writing, are a welcome addition to the literature of what it means to be a writer.

THOMAS H. BRENNAN (Spring 2016)

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