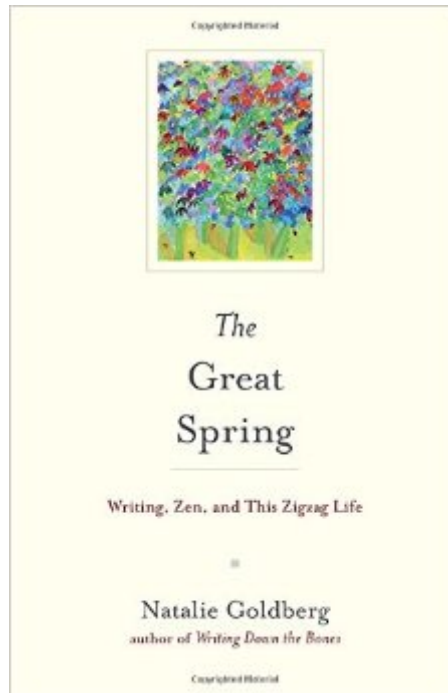


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The Great Spring: Writing, Zen, And This Zigzag Life



Synopsis

From beloved writing teacher and author of the best-selling *Writing Down the Bones: a treasury of personal stories reflecting a life filled with journeysâinner and outerâzigzagging around the world and home again.* Here, Natalie Goldberg, "a writer both energized and enlightened" (Julia Cameron), shares those vivid moments that have wakened her to new ways of being. We follow alongside her mapless meanderings in the New Mexican desert and her pilgrimages to Bob Dylan's birthplace and to Larry McMurtry's dusty Texas ghost town of rare books. We feel her deep hunger while she sits *zazen* in a monastery in Japan, and her profound loss when she hears of the passing of a dear friend while teaching in the French countryside. Through it all, she remains grounded in a life informed by two constants: the practices of writing and of Zen. With humor and insight, Natalie encircles around the essential questions these paths compel her toward: *Where does this life lead? Who are we?* This is a book to be relished one awakening at a time. Each story is a reminder that no matter how hard the situation or desolate you may feel, spring will come again, breaking through a cold winter, bringing early yellow forsythia flowers. And the Great Spring of enlightenmentâthat sudden rush of acceptance, pain cracking open, obstructions shatteringâwill also burst forth..

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Customer Reviews

The author of the excellent *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Shambhala Library) and several other books pens a thoughtful look back at decades of Zen training.

It's good. But it's a book about a person who sits a lot of meditation, not a book

about writing or a full autobiography. The writing, word after word, is wonderful. Sparse yet meaningful. Original thoughts on timeless truths. Too bad there isn't more of a story arc here, or thoughts on writing. It's partly a collection of previously published articles, and sometimes it shows. The title refers to enlightenment, coming alive after the frozen winter. Obstructions shatter. Pain cracks open. The previously resisted truth releases. An acceptance of transiency flows through. The author says that compared to *Bones*, this is a more mature knowing, saying in an even clearer, more experienced what is important. And it is. For people who enjoyed *Bones*, or have sat a lot of Zen, her words will resonate. It's a worthwhile trip around Zen centers in Japan and the States. A well-written well-developed meditation. For others, I'd try *Bones* or some other books first. Oh, and it includes some wonderful poems. Often I ask: Was it worth it to dedicate yourself so completely? The answer: No. Then I remember: I saw inside the night sky. (I hope you find this review useful.)

If you are familiar with Natalie Goldberg's unique voice, you could identify her prose in an anonymous mass of writings. Few writers can mimic her settings and descriptions and execute her succinct style. A teacher and literary luminary, branded for *Writing Down the Bones*, her lucid writing muse manages to cut the reader to the bone. *The Great Spring*, a collection of 22 essays, is no exception. The problem I encounter is that her writing may cut to the bone, but does not dig far enough "into the marrow. It lacks. I am left, though satisfied with intellectual gold nuggets, hungering. I imagine wearing a therapist's role, notebook in hand, sitting across from Natalie and repeatedly grilling, "That's all dandy, but how does it MAKE YOU FEEL?" Though the author has had many relationships, an ex-husband, girlfriends, friends, teachers and students, her writing leaves me with a sense that her life, though complete, successful and robust, has an intimacy deficiency, isolated like a ghost town in New Mexico (her residence). I cannot help but wonder if the emotional isolation is a result of her less than perfect childhood or if this state is a soul searching for nourishment. In fact, in a portion of *The Great Spring*, her lack of feelings comes across as a barrage of ingratitude, naval gazing and a lamentable lack of consideration for others. This near sterility parallels her longtime Zen practice, which she presents as a discipline that, at least to me and my "monkey mind," is painfully rigid. And, to top it off, with no particular theme or order, her essays are presented as a jumbled hot mess. However, even after considering all this, *The Great Spring* is redeemed. Ms. Goldberg is bestowed with a maturity, a rare perception, that exemplifies her work and makes it so yellow-highlighter worthy! Her insights on aging, death and letting go, for instance, tickle the brain to endorphin bliss of no return. Writing about

her mother's death, she says, "I can't wrap my mind around her death. It follows me like a ghost. But every time I turn around to look at it, it vanishes. I have a lot of crying to do, but it isn't coming. Something is over, but I don't yet know what it is." The final chapters mark the point where her fear of intimacy unravels both with herself and the reader. For example, after she describes, ironically, the lack of depth in Palo Alto, California, she writes, "Layer by layer I was pulling off the old protections. Nowhere could I find a foothold to drag myself away to some safe cave. Everywhere I turned was confusion and suffering, inside me and outside me. No difference. I was saying good-bye to all of my old recourses" "I could name a dozen right off the top" "from just feeling the pain, from settling down into its scratchy nest. Finally there was nowhere to go, no more hiding place, not even Zen." Her poetry is the fruit of the vine in *The Great Spring*. After wrestling with my own writing demons for more than three decades, her book gifted me with the answer I have been seeking particularly for these past five years. Often I ask: Was it worth it to dedicate yourself so completely? The answer: No. Then I remember: I saw inside the night sky. Reading and rereading these two dozen words with my moist eyes, I had discovered my own Great Spring.

This is not actually a book about writing. Nor is it really a book about Zen. I am interested in both writing and Zen practice, and thus came away rather disappointed. Take away meditation on writing and on.....well....meditation, and I found that very little of what remained held my interest. A sizable proportion of the essays have been published before. Unsurprisingly, then, the book is less well-integrated or coherent than many of her previous books. It's hard for me to separate my puzzlement about why some of the essays/chapters were included--I found them neither deep nor insightful-- from my growing discomfort with the author. I found it unpleasant to read a number of the entries, not because I found the writing unartful, but because I found the writer decidedly unlikeable: just a bit too self-focused and.....well....vain. Strange, I thought, given her years of Zen practice.

This collection of previously published essays by Goldberg, best known for *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* is subtitled "Writing, Zen, and This Zigzag Life," but is really focused on Goldberg's Zen practice and meditation. If you've never read Goldberg's writing other than in *Writing Down the Bones*, you'll be pleasantly surprised by her artfulness: her sensory details give a real sense of place, which is great, especially in the many travel essays. However, I often felt an emotional distance from the writing. There's a kind of coolness and intellectualism when she talks about her feelings, which is in strong contrast to the vivid detail she writes with. I'd recommend

this book to people with an interest in meditation and Zen spirituality, with the caveat that the essays don't hang together particularly well - I found myself wishing there were more of a connection between them.

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