

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# Becoming Yourself: An Interview with Natalie Goldberg

February 2021



**Mark Matousek:** Welcome, Natalie. It's really good to see you. Thank you for joining The Seekers Forum. I want you to begin by talking about *Wild Mind*. Something that I've always appreciated so much in your work is your insistence on first thoughts, immediate experience, and not running away from the mess of our lives. In fact, the epigraph of Allen Ginsberg says it all. He says, "Follow your inner moonlight, don't hide the madness." Can you say why that's so important to you in writing and in life?

**Natalie Goldberg:** Well, that's where the energy is. [chuckles] Can you imagine, "Oh, I had a very nice time. It was very interesting. It was a lot of fun." The real energy is with the agony, with being human and what it means, the suffering, and how we really live. Also, only when we face that, can we transform it, otherwise, it's just a sheen over everything and it's boring. It doesn't create good writing.

**Mark:** Did Zen practice help you to learn to go there more directly?

**Natalie:** That's a good question. No, writing practice did. Zen sometimes – I was just into how much my body ached because we had to sit for forty minutes all day. Sit, walk, sit, walk. It got me connected to my body, but writing practice, keeping my hand moving, and accepting my mind at any level, is what cracked it open.

The combination of them allowed me to study my mind, which is the real tool of writing, pen, paper, and the human mind. Where do thoughts come from? Memories, ideas, all from the mind. You have to know how to work with it.

**Mark:** The presence that you cultivate in practice does help with the writing as well?

**Natalie:** Yes. You want me to say that?

**Mark:** No, no, no. [chuckles] In fact, that's my experience, that one-pointed attention, however you want to look at it, absolutely, helps me as a writer. I feel my observation, my ability to observe my mind in writing helps me in practice as well.

**Natalie:** Well, I would say that the sitting taught me about monkey mind and taught me about discursive thinking, yadda, yadda, yadda, yadda. I knew that I had to get below that to really connect with writing.

**Mark:** Do you think that it's more difficult today in this virtual reality world, just overloaded with information, do you feel it's more difficult to be original in the world?

**Natalie:** I don't know about original, I think it's really hard to become present. It really helps scatter the mind and knot it. Concentration isn't something that's honored, one-pointedness, staying with something, there's just – it really scatters us and I know a lot about the mind and it does it to me, too. I hate computers [chuckles] and yet I have to use them and it very much scatters me. I find it very tough and I'm very concerned for my students and it's hard. I don't let them use computers when they work with me.

**Mark:** Because it scatters too much, it's too external?

**Natalie:** And stay with your physicality of a notebook, your arm, and your hand, and a pen, something cheap, that's available to everyone, anywhere.

**Mark:** What about conformity? Do you feel there's more pressure in the world now to compete, to conform because we're so exposed to everyone else's lives so intimately? What effect does that have on our willingness to be ourselves?

**Natalie:** I think people are always looking for security is the deep truth. Human beings want security and they conform. It might be more obvious now, but I think it's a deep truth and that's part of learning to be a writer and for me to write books, *Three Simple Lines* to go my own direction and stay in it. It's not easy and it's harder now, I think.

**Mark:** You think it's harder because of technology?

**Natalie:** Yes. I think it is harder. You've got to be connected to yourself and your life and how you feel and experience things. People, instead, know how they experience the computer or the internet.

**Mark:** Right. You say it beautifully, you say anything we fully do is an alone journey and that's true. I have a practice of writing, of love. If [crosstalk]—

**Natalie:** You're not as willing to go alone because you've got all these activities and so many things to watch. What is it? Netflix this, that, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. You don't even go shopping. You just do everything online. At least when you go shopping, you feel the material, you meet the salesperson, you exchange physical money, you lick an envelope and put a stamp on.

It's very different now, and maybe a different kind of writing. I don't know. I only know what I know and what I've practiced for a long time. It's simply against what's going on now.

**Mark:** That's [chuckles] what it seems to me. Do you think that there's another side of the pandemic and the forced withdrawal that's helping people simplify, go inward and notice what really matters?

**Natalie:** Maybe, but we're isolated, so I don't know. I know people are very lonely but I do know that people are reading more, which I like.

**Mark:** How do we shift loneliness to solitude? That sense of barrenness to a feeling of fullness in our being alive?

**Natalie:** Well, it's an acceptance. It's an acceptance of loneliness and that, that certainly in Japanese culture, they accepted as the original state, that we're all lonely, that you die alone.

**Mark:** That's not sad?

**Natalie:** No, no, no.

**Mark:** How does one make that flip? How do you make that switch from, "Oh, that's so sad," a Western way of looking at it?

**Natalie:** I think you accept it. You just accept it and your willingness to talk about it. I needed Zen because, before Zen, in my Jewish culture, nobody wants to talk about loneliness. They wanted to all stay together all the time. I was able to address it in my Zen life and I certainly had it, a lot of loneliness.

**Mark:** It can take you deeper. It doesn't need to be intimidating or –

**Natalie:** Just a state like anything else. Like happiness, like sadness.

**Mark:** Yes. I'd like to read a section from the book where you talk about Monet. It's so beautiful and why it's important to be broken open.

**Natalie:** Okay. You're talking about my new book, right?

**Mark:** Your new book or we're going to get right to it.

[laughter]

Where you talk about being broken open, you say, "He felt alone, shattered, and defeated. He would go to the pond and sit before the water lilies in despair. How to capture what was before him? Under his deft hand, the lilies broke open, filled with more light, became more abstract. The world no longer a solid place." That is such a gorgeous passage. How does attention break the world open in that way and reveal the light?

**Natalie:** Well, first of all, he had many years of practice. Monet, he was doing the water lilies abstract at the end of his life. It's a lifetime of painting and he was broken. It was World War I, his wife died, who he's very, very close with. He lost his son and he was alone in Giverny. He went out every day to look at those water lilies. I think as a practice, going out every day, really broke him. He would look and they broke open. They weren't just water lilies, tight. They had broken open into light. He had some moments of waking up and then he probably went back and had dinner and was alone again. There's no solution.

**Mark:** It's not a problem to be solved?

**Natalie:** No. Well, you can't solve it. We're human and born in human bodies.

**Mark:** Yet so much spiritual practice seems to be aimed at trying to solve it, fix it, make it better, bring out the light, and skip over a lot of the mess.

**Natalie:** Well, I think that's a misunderstanding of spirituality, but that might get you there to practice. As you practice more deeply, it's more of just being here and accepting it. What do you do with all of this craziness? You think you're going to control it? It gets worse and worse.

[laughter]

I can't believe it.

**Mark:** It's true just when you think it can't get any harder or crazier, it gets crazier.

**Natalie:** Yes. [laughs]

**Mark:** Have you seen by the way, the video of Monet painting in Giverny?

**Natalie:** Yes. I don't know if you know, I'm a painter. I really study, or I love stories about painters. I get inspired by them.

**Mark:** Someone showed me last night. It was a collection. It was Degas, it was Renoir. It was Monet painting [crosstalk]—

**Natalie:** I went to all their homes in France and I've been to Giverny many times actually.

**Mark:** Let's talk about vulnerability in the face of this harsh world. You say that if you're not afraid of the voices inside you, you won't fear the critics outside you. How do we cultivate that self-reliance and self-trust?

**Natalie:** I do it by practice. When you say the word originality, I go back because we always have this idea, "How do you become original?" What you really do is listen to who you are and say what you need to say. It's scary. It's very scary.

When I first started writing, because of my childhood, that I was put down a lot, I thought they would all think I was an idiot. Instead, they said I was a genius. I thought you're kidding. When I kept saying things and creeping a little ahead – But I promise you that if you speak from your true self, somebody will respond. If they put you down a lot, get out of that arena. Get in an arena where you can just speak with no response. Be with other writers and do writing practice where you write and read with no comment.

You get to learn to voice your voice [chuckles] and it's amazing how much, if there's no comment, you can hear when you're on and when you're off, when you're bullshitting and when you've really hit home.

**Mark:** Right. I was actually also thinking about you as a published author and how one deals with readers. We write but lots and lots of people want to be read as well. When you open the door [chuckles] to all those opinions, keeping your one center can be a challenge and you seem to do it really well.

**Natalie:** I protect myself. I don't listen to a lot of opinions.

**Mark:** That's smart. [chuckles]

**Natalie:** I don't ever look at Amazon or any of that stuff. I don't even know how to. [chuckles] I don't know how.

**Mark:** You're smart. [chuckles] Okay. Let's talk about *Three Simple Lines*. You mentioned in an email to me that it's like nothing you've ever written before. Obviously, every book is new, but how so? What does that mean for you?

**Natalie:** I think because I'm not the main character. For me, I did a lot of research. I read at least fifty books and I didn't know – fifty books about haiku and Japan and the old world on haiku, the original people. Also how to incorporate all that information? I wasn't the center of the universe in this book. Also, I did a lot of research and I didn't know what I was doing. [chuckles] I worked on it for three years and I didn't dare say to myself or to anyone else that I didn't know what I was doing.

I never talk about a book when I'm working on it. For three years I was alone with it and I would just dread working on it because I didn't know what I was doing. I would get this idea and I'd go all the way this way. Then I'd go all the way this way. Eventually, the last month, I wove it all together and that was the structure I created, but I didn't know anything till the very end.

**Mark:** Is that a common experience for you, too, when you're [crosstalk]—

**Natalie:** No, I usually – I'm not as lost. I have an incredible mojo that I'm still discovering because if you're not discovering, why write? It's fun to discover, but I have a mojo and I'm going someplace and I want to tell you and I'm alive. This was, I was learning.

Also, who was I to write about Japan? Jewish girl from Brooklyn. As a matter of fact, at one point – Because, I don't believe in that. I've gone to Japan many times, but I don't believe in that. What do I know about Japan? I know you have to live there for forty years, [chuckles] but what I did was I moved to Brooklyn and I got an Airbnb in Brooklyn as I wrote some of these chapters. Why? Because I felt that I was ashamed. I hadn't been to Brooklyn in forty years. I was turning my back on where I came from and I was writing about something else.

I felt I'm going to plant myself in Brooklyn at least when I write about Japan. I'm honoring where I come from, that helped. Japan is so enigmatic. It took a lot of work to make it that simple and to hand over the information I did.

**Mark:** It is simple. I was saying before we began, there isn't an extra word in the book. It's very – I hate economical, but it's minimalist in a beautiful way. It is a haiku.

**Natalie:** Yes, the whole thing is an experience of a haiku.

**Mark:** Yes. Let me ask you for people who haven't read the book and don't know yet, what is it about haiku that you love so much and that you feel is important to readers today and writers today?

**Natalie:** Well, I think because we're ignorant about haiku. As a matter of fact, the first person who interviewed me had never heard of haiku and I was so shocked. Never heard of haiku, and didn't know how to pronounce it. If I can find it very quickly, I will actually read it to you because I think that it's very simple.

I studied with Alan Ginsberg in 1976 at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. That was in Boulder at Naropa. One day he said this to us. I should have had it more – he also told us that, “the formal five syllable, then seven, then five often taught in Western schools does not necessarily work in English. In Japanese, each syllable counts. They don't have ‘buh,’ ‘an,’ ‘tha’ – and those articles of speech. So he encouraged us not to worry about the count if we write or translate haiku. Only make sure the three lines make the mind leap upon hearing one. ‘The only real measure of a haiku,’ Allen told us, that one hot July afternoon, ‘is upon hearing one, your mind experiences a small sensation of space.’ He paused. I leaned in breathless. ‘Which is nothing less than God.’”

Of course, and upon hearing it, it slows you down. It brings you home. Maybe I'll read just a few, so you'll have [crosstalk] that experience. You'll see what we're talking about. Oh, this is one of my favorites. This single haiku by Buson – I studied the four greats who practiced the way of haiku like someone else practices the way of Zen.

This single haiku, I made a vow, that someday I would go to Japan and go to Buson's grave, find it, and thank him for this haiku.

It took me nineteen years to get there. Well, I know it by heart. “Ah, grief and sadness, the fishing line trembles in the autumn breeze.” I'll say it again and watch your mind. “Ah, grief,

and sadness the fishing line trembles in the autumn breeze.” So simple and so present. The fishing line, you don’t have to have fancy things.

**Mark:** Right. There’s always an enigmatic quality to it, a mystery space. I think that’s what he means by, “Nothing less than God.” It doesn’t make sense, the mind can’t capture it rationally.

**Natalie:** Yes, I think that that’s true but it also you have to – First you don’t, “What, what, what?” and then, “Aaaaa, oh,” so there’s a little space because you’re, “Oooh, ooooh.”

This is Issa which is one of the favorites of the Japanese. His mother died when he was three. He wrote this first haiku when he was six years old. “Come play with me, you, little sparrow, motherless sparrow.” “Come play with me, you, little sparrow, motherless sparrow.”

**Mark:** It’s a magic, it’s the repetition. Why does it do that? Why does it create that-- Verses are so beautiful. It’s so beautiful and poignant [crosstalk]—

**Natalie:** It’s so simple and it’s such a good thing for now because we’re so worried and so upset and we’re so out of control. This, when I read haiku, it brings me right back. And then if you practice haiku, you have to notice and not notice something big like a terrible storm or something. Small. “Notice the snowflakes. Simply, I’m here, simply snow falls.” That was Issa.

**Mark:** It steals the mind, it quiets the mind.

**Natalie:** Exactly, it’s nice, so meditation isn’t the only way. That’s partially why I studied it. Listen to this one too. This is Issa. “Sitting on her eggs, the chicken admires the peony.”

**Mark:** I [chuckles] love that so much.

**Natalie:** “Sitting on her eggs, the chicken admires the peony.” You’re not even there. You’re noticing the chicken and what the chicken notices. Issa also, even though, he has some very funny part at haiku, he had a very hard life. His daughter died, his three children died, his wife died and he loved his daughter so much. Listen to this. “In a dream, my daughter lifts a melon to her soft cheek.”

You forget about your agony and you’re inside someone else’s. Yet he’s able to express it, so it communicates from the 17th Century. “In a dream, my daughter lifts a melon to her soft cheek.”

**Mark:** Beautiful, it’s so beautiful. Another one I love is, “In the darkness of the heart a firefly.”

**Natalie:** Oh yes, who is that?

**Mark:** “I grasp in the darkness of the heart a fire-fly.”

**Natalie:** Is that Buson or Issa?

**Mark:** I’m not sure, it’s from your book. I didn’t write down the author.

**Natalie:** Okay, because usually now, I've gotten to the point where I actually can tell the difference between who wrote it, even though it's only three lines because I put in the biographies of these people which became really interesting. In a way, writing the book, the assignment was, I learned all the stuff.

There is one of them, Shiki. Shiki at thirteen coughed up his first blood, he had TB and he died in his early thirties. He knew he was going to die his whole life and yet he not only kept writing haiku but he really extended it and brought it out. He had many, many disciples. Here, hold on this is my writing desk. I have this on my desk. Well I'll tell you first, his five last years he was in such in pain he had to stay in bed. Every day he would drag himself to the edge of the tatami and would sit all day looking out at his garden waiting for haiku. Here is Shiki, if you can see him. Can you see him?

**Mark:** Yes.

**Natalie:** At the edge of his tatami. I found out extraordinary things, and yet they kept showing up just like you learn in Zen, show up. Just what you learn in writing, in whatever, show up.

**Mark:** Right. So, when you're writing haiku you're not generating it from the mind, you're really waiting for a download?

**Natalie:** I thought that's what you do but in truth, you actually practice it like everything else. You actually keep practicing it, you can edit it, once in a while they come to you. It's like everything else. [crosstalk]—

**Mark:** It really is like poetry. It is like writing poetry. You might get a line but then you work it.

**Natalie:** Yes, I practiced, that's what I thought it was, it was like magic, it would just come to you.

**Mark:** Yes, that's right. [crosstalk]—

**Natalie:** But you actually have to practice it and work on it, work on it a lot. Mostly I am happy reading it. I did join because I didn't know what the book was [chuckles] about. I also joined a haiku group which I write about in one of the chapters and studied haiku with them and wrote them and brought them in each month and they ripped them apart. I was the worst but I delighted in that, it's nice not to be so great.

**Mark:** You didn't have any pretense or otherwise. You knew you were a beginner.

**Natalie:** No, I just kept saying, "Just teach me, teach me." They would pull me aside at the end and say, "If you want to learn haiku, read a lot of them and write a lot of them." I listened to it and I think, "That's exactly what I tell my students."

[chuckles]

**Mark:** Right. Keep your hand moving.

**Natalie:** Yeah, it was no different.



**Mark:** You say that this is the third book in your cancer trilogy, you barely talk about cancer in the book but you say that you wrote it partly to say, “You see, cancer, you didn’t get me.”

**Natalie:** Yes, [chuckles] nobody who read this book would know it was my third book in a cancer trilogy. When I came home in 2012 from Japan, on a trip with Upaya, with Kaz Tanahashi and Joan Halifax, I started this book just spontaneously. I’d gone to Buson’s grave and then soon after I got cancer, and so I left it behind. While I had cancer I wrote *The Great Spring*, which I love.

When I found out I was going to survive, I wrote, *Let the Whole Thundering World Come Home* about having cancer at the same time as my partner had cancer. Then I was well enough, I thought, “Let me go look back at what I wrote,” hoping it wasn’t good so I could forget about it. I had 25 pages and I thought, “Oh, this really is good. I have to finish it.”

I worked on it and then I felt like cancer – Eventually, something is going to get me but “Cancer you didn’t get me then, I got to finish this book.” I wrote three books in five years while I had cancer. I’m tired now.

[laughter]

**Mark:** You’re tired. One last question. I just wanted to talk about – You talked about being in love with your life and you radiate this in your work. I fell in love with *Writing Down the Bones* 30 years ago. It has an energy to it, a power to it, it’s palpable. How do you regenerate in a time like this when there’s so much overwhelming sadness and difficulty? How do you stay hopeful and connected and engaged?

**Natalie:** It’s all new for me now. I could tell you in the old life, but the old life is over. So, now, first of all, hopeful has never been something I believed in, to be honest with you, in the old life or this life. What I like is no hope. No hope. Things as they are. I’m not hopeful.

In this life, well, first of all, I was, I was crazy. Oh, I’ll tell you. In August, I completely – I was not Natalie. What I mean by not that, I didn’t exist. I became a fifties housewife. I didn’t know who I was, I was completely gone. I had no idea. I couldn’t write, I couldn’t do anything. I was very messed up and friends even were scared for me. I was no one. I had –

**Mark:** This past August?

**Natalie:** Yes, this past August. It was partially because I was home all the time. I was used to traveling a lot. I was used to connecting with people. I didn’t know I was so social because I usually like to spend a lot of time alone, but I missed human beings. I missed going to a cafe, and even if I knew no one, there were other breathing human beings. I didn’t realize how much that juiced me. I was just alone. I live in this beautiful house alone. I do have a partner, but she doesn’t live with me.

I just was alone and you couldn’t go near anybody. I had a residency in Port Townsend in Washington. I was going to cancel it because it’s COVID and I wasn’t going to go and I’d have to drive and et cetera, et cetera. My girlfriend said to me, because this is how lost I was, she said, “I’ll drive you to Port Townsend.” I said, “Okay.” We went and we stopped at Salt Lake and finally, I opened the map to look, and we were going to go along southern Idaho. I looked and I said, “Oh, Ketchum, Idaho is near where we’re going to be. It’s out of the way. It’s too out of the way, but I’ve always wanted to go to Ketchum, Idaho for like 35 years,”

and [my partner] said, “Well, let’s go.” I said, “Really?” because it wasn’t logical. I was dead. I said, “Really?” She said, “Yes, let’s just go. We have enough time. There’s no limit anymore. [chuckles] There’s no structure. There’s nothing.”

**Mark:** Nobody’s waiting for you.

**Natalie:** Yes, so we drove to Ketchum, and do you know what’s in Ketchum, Idaho?

**Mark:** Hemingway.

**Natalie:** Yes, Hemingway’s grave and I visit graves. *Let the Whole Thundering World Come Home*, I write about all the different – I go to painters’ and writers’ graves to see where they ended up and to thank them, to honor them. We went to Ketchum, Idaho. When would I ever get to Idaho? For 35 years, I wanted to go, but it never dawned on me to go.

We got to the hotel and about four o’clock and Maxine said, “Oh, let’s go tomorrow. I’m too tired.” I said, “I’m going right now.” I ran down to the front of the hotel and I said, “Where’s the cemetery?” And turned out, it was two blocks away. I ran to it as the sun was setting and it was the cemetery that doesn’t ever close. It’s a beautiful cemetery with lots of pines.

I thought I’d know right away where Hemingway’s grave was. I would just know, but I didn’t. Luckily I had my cell phone because I never carry it and I called the man at the desk. [chuckles] I said, “Where is it? Where is it?”

[laughter]

He said, “Just look for two pine trees that are close enough together, that only one grave could fit.” I said, “There’s pine trees all over.” He said, “Look for the one where there’s only –” and then I said, “I think I see it!” And I found it. It was flat, the size of a rectangle, completely flat, the size of a man laying out six feet, and all it said on it is, Ernest Miller Hemingway, 1899 to 1961 or 1962, I can’t remember. He was 62 years old, he shot himself. I sat down on a root stump of one of the pine trees. I poured my heart out to him. He was one of my deepest earliest influences.

I traveled through Spain reading *Death in the Afternoon* about bull fighting, and I didn’t care where I was. It brought me deeper into Spain than walking around Spain. He wrote *A Moveable Feast* in Ketchum.

**Mark:** Oh, I didn’t know that.

**Natalie:** It was just one of my favorite books. I just poured my heart out to him. Of course, he’s been dead for – 1961 or 1962, 60 years. Probably it’s all vapor, but I felt that something if any place, it was there and I just poured my heart out. As I poured my heart out, I came back to myself. He was totally crazy at the end, he was very messed up, but he wrote *A Moveable Feast*.

He was his own practitioner, a great practitioner. I came back to myself, “Oh yeah, this is my path for this lifetime,” and it really brought me back. The next day [chuckles] I went to the bookstore and they recognize me there and they called the head of the library who ran his house. No one was allowed in it and she contacted me and gave me a tour of the house, which was very moving. Of course, he shot himself in the house. That was wonderful, that was a great opportunity but it was the grave, that was the most important to me.

**Mark:** It brought you back to life. It brought you –

**Natalie:** It brought you me home again. I think what I'm saying as an answer to you, it's not easy to keep coming back to yourself and being alive and remembering who you are and what you're about. Sometimes you have to go really twisted and zigzag to find yourself. That's really what good literature is about, actually.

**Mark:** It's what practice is about too, get completely lost. If you're not getting lost, you're not there, [chuckles] no way. Well, that's a beautiful way to end the conversation, Natalie. Thank you so, so much for doing this.

**Natalie:** It's really fun to talk to you. I feel really comfortable talking with you.

**Mark:** Thank you.

**Natalie:** Thank you, Mark.

**Mark:** Bye.