

An Excerpt from *Wild Mind* by Natalie Goldberg
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—Michael Wenger

About ten years ago, I took *bodhisattva* vows. A *bodhisattva* is a person who promises not to enter enlightenment until he or she has helped all sentient beings become enlightened. In other words, you let everyone else ahead of you into nirvana. At the time I took the vows, it seemed ridiculous. There were a lot of sentient beings out there. How could I possibly save them all? I was having enough trouble saving myself when I crossed a busy intersection in the Uptown area of Minneapolis. But I took the vows anyway and like pretty much everything else in Zen, I figured I would understand it much later. Now I understand it as a generous state of mind.

It is no different from saying I am a runner when I first start out and in reality I'm just a klutz in the present moment. And it is no different from saying you are a writer after you've written your first shaky paragraph and don't believe you can go on. Go ahead, be brave, say it anyway: "I am a writer." Over time, the image in your mind and the reality will become one, if you continue to practice. After a while, you won't even notice the discrepancy, you'll be too involved in creating that second paragraph to notice writing and non-writing. You will be engaged in the big journey. That is all that matters....

A friend of mine wanted very much to study with Katagiri Roshi, but he lived in Minneapolis and she did not want to leave the house she had built and lived in for three years in the Berkshires. Finally, she thought, "Well, I'll ask him what he thinks I should do." She wrote him a long letter telling him her predicament. Then for the next three weeks she rushed to the mailbox each day waiting for his response. After a month had passed, she realized she wasn't going to hear from him. She had to make her own decision. She sold her house and moved to Minneapolis. The day after she moved, she went to visit Roshi. She said, "Well, here I am." He said, "Zazen is at five a.m."

That's all. No praise: Good girl, you came to the Zen center. Or blame: You shouldn't have left your beautiful house. Finally, you just step forward with your life.

That's what writing is like too. Look around you. There's no one there. No one cares that much whether you write or not. You just have to do it.

For a long time I thought it mattered. I thought my success in writing would finally win me love. This wasn't a conscious wish, but it was a strong one. Below that desire I found a cleaner one, a more grounded one: I wrote because I wanted to, because I wanted to step forward and speak.

It's okay to embark on writing because you think it will get you love. At least it gets you going, but it doesn't last. After a while you realize that no one cares that much. Then you find another reason: money. You can dream on that one while the bills pile up. Then you think: "Well, I'm the sensitive type. I have to express myself." Do me a favor. Don't be so sensitive. Be tough. It will get you further along when you get rejected.

Finally, you just do it because you happen to like it.

I went to Roshi last year and asked him, "Why did you say so many years ago that I should make writing my practice?" I thought there was some deep esoteric reason. He raised his eyebrows. He thought it was a curious question. "Because you like to write. That's why." "Oh," I nodded. Huh, that simple.