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Writing Down the
Bones
Natalie
Goldberg

I Don't Want to Die

Suzuki Roshi established the San Francisco Zen Center and is the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. I have heard that he was a great Zen master. He died of cancer in 1971. When Zen masters die we like to think they will say something very inspiring as they are about to bite the Big Emptiness, something like "Hi-ho Silver!" or "Remember to wake up" or "Life is everlasting." Right before Suzuki Roshi's death, Katagiri Roshi, an old friend, visited him. Katagiri stood by the bedside; Suzuki looked up and said, "I don't want to die." That simple. He was who he was and said plainly what he felt in the moment. Katagiri bowed. "Thank you for your great effort."

Katagiri Roshi has said that when a spiritual person stands in front of a great art masterpiece, she feels peaceful. When an artist sees a masterpiece, it urges her on to create another one. An artist exudes vitality; a spiritual person exudes peace. But, says Katagiri, behind the peace of the spiritual person is tremendous liveliness and spontaneity, which is action in the moment. And an artist, though she expresses vitality, must behind it touch down on quiet peace; otherwise, the artist will burn out. Unfortunately, we have many examples of artists who have burned out through alcoholism, suicide, and mental illness.

So while we are busy writing, all the burning life we are eager to express should come out of a place of peace. This will help us and keep us from jumping around excitedly in the middle of a story and never quite getting back to our desk to finish it. Someplace in us should know the utter simplicity of saying what we feel—"I don't want to die"—at the moment of dying. Not