Writing Down the Bones is available as an audio tape from Shambhala Lion Editions.

FREEING THE WRITER WITHIN

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1986
For all my students
past, present, and future

and for
Kate Green and
Barbara Schmitz.

May we all meet in heaven café
writing for eternity.
lot. And don’t think too much. Just enter the heat of words and sounds and colored sensations and keep your pen moving across the page.

If you read good books, when you write, good books will come out of you. Maybe it’s not quite that easy, but if you want to learn something, go to the source. Basho, the great seventeenth-century Haiku master, said, “If you want to know about a tree, go to the tree.” If you want to know poetry, read it, listen to it. Let those patterns and forms be imprinted in you. Don’t step away from poetry to analyze a poem with your logical mind. Enter poetry with your whole body. Dogen, a great Zen master, said, “If you walk in the mist, you get wet.” So just listen, read, and write. Little by little, you will come closer to what you need to say and express it through your voice.

Be patient and don’t worry about it. Just sing and write in tune.

Don’t Marry the Fly

Watch when you listen to a piece of writing. There might be spaces where your mind wanders. We sometimes respond with comments such as “I don’t know, it got too deep for me” or “There was just too much description, I couldn’t follow it.” Often the problem is not in the reader but in the writing.

These are places where the writer went back on himself, became diverted in his own mind’s enjoyment, forgetting where the story was originally heading.

A writer might be writing about a restaurant scene but become obsessed with the fly on the napkin and begin to describe, in minute detail, the fly’s back, the fly’s dreams, its early childhood, its technique for flying through screen windows. The reader or listener becomes lost because right before that the waiter had come to the table in the writing and the listener is waiting for him to serve the food. Also, the writer may not be clear on his true direction or not directly present with his material. This creates a blur in the writing. It is some area that is fuzzy and so loses the reader’s attention because it makes a little gap, letting the reader’s mind wander away from the work.

A responsibility of literature is to make people awake, present, alive. If the writer wanders, then the reader, too, will wander. The fly on the table might be part of the whole description of a restaurant. It might be appropriate to tell precisely the sandwich that it just walked over, but there is a fine line between precision and self-indulgence.

Stay on the side of precision; know your goal and stay present with it. If your mind and writing wander from it, bring them
Writing Down the Bones

gently back. When we write, many avenues open up inside us. Don’t get too far afield. Stay with the details and with your direction. Don’t be self-absorbed, which eventually creates vague, muddy writing. We might really get to know the fly but forget where we are: the restaurant, the rain outside, the friend across the table. The fly is important, but it has its place. Don’t ignore the fly; don’t become obsessed with it. Irving Howe wrote in his introduction to Jewish American Stories that the best art *almost* becomes sentimental but doesn’t. Recognize the fly, even love it if you want, but don’t marry it.
Syntax

Try this. Take one of your most boring pieces of writing and choose from it three or four consecutive lines or sentences and write them at the top of a blank piece of paper.

I can't write because I'm an ice cube and my mouth goes dry and there's nothing to say and I'd rather eat ice cream.

Okay. See each one of those words simply as wooden blocks, all the same size and color. No noun or verb has any more value than the, a, and. Everything is equal. Now for about a third of a page scramble them up as though you were just moving wooden blocks around. Don't try to make any sense of what you write down. Your mind will keep trying to construct something. Hold back that urge, relax, and mindlessly write down the words. You will have to repeat words to fill a third of a page.

Write I'm an mouth rather cream say eat ice and nothing dry I an write rather say and my goes cube because an there's I'd to dry goes write and mouth cream to I'd rather dry cube I'm an write I and nothing say goes an can't because nothing rather I'd dry to and say cream goes ice rather to my cube nothing there's say.

Now, if you would like, arbitrarily put in a few periods, a question mark, maybe an exclamation mark, colons, or semicolons. Do all of this without thinking, without trying to make any sense. Just for fun.

Write I'm an mouth rather cream. Say eat ice and nothing dry! I an write rather say and; my goes cube because an
there’s. I’d to dry goes write and mouth cream to. I’d rather. Dry cube I’m an write I and nothing say goes. An can’t because nothing rather; I’d dry to and say cream goes ice. Rather to my cube nothing there’s say?

Now read it aloud as though it were saying something. Your voice should have inflection and expression. You might try reading it in an angry voice, an exuberant, sad, whining, petulant, or demanding voice, to help you get into it.

What have we done? Our language is usually locked into a sentence syntax of subject/verb/direct-object. There is a subject acting on an object. “I see the dog”—with this sentence structure, “I” is the center of the universe. We forget in our language structure that while “I” looks at “the dog,” “the dog” is simultaneously looking at us. It is interesting to note that in the Japanese language the sentence would say, “I dog seeing.” There is an exchange or interaction rather than a subject acting on an object.

We think in sentences, and the way we think is the way we see. If we think in the structure subject/verb/direct-object, then that is how we form our world. By cracking open that syntax, we release energy and are able to see the world afresh and from a new angle. We stop being so chauvinistic as Homo sapiens. Other beings besides human beings matter on the earth: ants have their own cities; dogs have their own lives; cats are always busy rehearsing for a nap; plants breathe; trees have a longer life span than we do. It is true that we can have a sentence with a dog or cat or a fly as the subject—“The dog sees the cat”—but still there is the pattern of self-centeredness and egocentricity built into the very structure of our language. It is a terrible burden to have to be master. We are not ruling the world. It is an illusion, and the illusion of our syntax structure perpetuates it.

Katagiri Roshi used to say: “Have kind consideration for all sentient beings.” Once I asked him, “What are sentient beings anyway? Are they things that feel?” He told me that we have to be kind even to the chair, the air, the paper, and the street. That’s how big and accepting our minds have to become. When Buddha reached enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he said: “I am now enlightened with all beings.” He didn’t say: “I am enlightened and you’re not!” or “I see enlightenment” as though he were separate from it.

This does not mean that from now on we should remain immobilized because we are afraid of offending the rug below our feet or accidentally jolting a glass. It does not mean that we should not use our syntax structure because it is wrong. Only once you have done this exercise, though you probably will go back to sentences, there is a crack, a place where the wind of energy can fly through you. Though “I eat an artichoke” sounds sensible and people will think you are sane, you now know that behind that syntax structure, the artichoke happens to also be eating you and changing you forever, especially if you dip it in garlic-butter sauce and if you totally let the artichoke leaf taste your tongue! The more you are aware of the syntax you move, see, and write in, the better control you have and the more you can step out of it when you need to. Actually, by breaking open syntax, you often get closer to the truth of what you need to say.

Here are some examples of poems taken from Shout, Applaud, a collection of poems written at Norhaven, a residence for women who are mentally retarded. These women were never solidly indoctrinated in English-language syntax, so these poems are good examples of what can be created outside of it. Also they are fresh in another way: they are full of surprise—because you had breakfast yesterday doesn’t mean it isn’t amazing to eat eggs today!

Give Me a White
by Marion Pinski
I love white
to write
to write my name.
Please give Marion
Writing Down the Bones

Pinski a white.
I like to white
because of write my name, I could.
I know how to spell it
correct.
I want white to write
my name with.
I like to write my name.
I'd like white, now.
I asked in a nice way.
I love white, I do.
To write, to write
my name, yes.
I got my own money, I do.
Trying to.

Maple Leaf
by BETTY FREEMAN
That I dream the lady does to be young
and to be in her pretty red Christmas ball.
Her dress looks beautiful like a swan.
The swan floats with his thin white feathers
when his soft snow head
floats under to be like snow again.
Then I like to be a woman like the one,
to be with a long wing.

The Stone and I
by BEVERLY OPSE
On my table lies a stone.
On the stone lies a glass of water.
The water is black with dirt.
The dirt is dry and dusty.
I'd invite a cabbage to eat.
The cabbage is very pleased.
It likes the rock
because it doesn't move.
Don’t Tell, but Show

There’s an old adage in writing: “Don’t tell, but show.” What does this actually mean? It means don’t tell us about anger (or any of those big words like honesty, truth, hate, love, sorrow, life, justice, etc.); show us what made you angry. We will read it and feel angry. Don’t tell readers what to feel. Show them the situation, and that feeling will awaken in them.

Writing is not psychology. We do not talk “about” feelings. Instead the writer feels and through her words awakens those feelings in the reader. The writer takes the reader’s hand and guides him through the valley of sorrow and joy without ever having to mention those words.

When you are present at the birth of a child you may find yourself weeping and singing. Describe what you see: the mother’s face, the rush of energy when the baby finally enters the world after many attempts, the husband breathing with his wife, applying a wet washcloth to her forehead. The reader will understand without your ever having to discuss the nature of life.

When you write, stay in direct connection with the senses and what you are writing about. If you are writing from first thoughts—the way your mind first flashes on something before second and third thoughts take over and comment, criticize, and evaluate—you won’t have to worry. First thoughts are the mind reflecting experiences—as close as a human being can get in words to the sunset, the birth, the bobby pin, the crocus. We can’t always stay with first thoughts, but it is good to know about them. They can easily teach us how to step out of the way and use words like a mirror to reflect the pictures.

Writing Down the Bones

As soon as I hear the word about in someone’s writing, it is an automatic alarm. “This story is about life.” Skip that line and go willy-nilly right into life in your writing. Naturally, when we do practice writing in our notebooks, we might write a general line; “I want to write about my grandmother” or “This is a story about success.” That’s fine. Don’t castigate yourself for writing it; don’t get critical and mix up the creator and editor. Simply write it, note it, and drop to a deeper level and enter the story and take us into it.

Some general statements are sometimes very appropriate. Just make sure to back each one with a concrete picture. Even if you are writing an essay, it makes the work so much more lively. Oh, if only Kant or Descartes had followed these instructions. “I think, therefore I am”—I think about bubble gum, horse racing, barbecue, and the stock market; therefore, I know I exist in America in the twentieth century. Go ahead, take Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* and get it to show what he is telling. We would all be a lot happier.

Several years ago I wrote down a story that someone had told me. My friends said it was boring. I couldn’t understand their reaction; I loved the story. What I realize now is that I wrote “about” the story, secondhand. I didn’t enter it and make friends with it. I was outside it; therefore, I couldn’t take anyone else into it. This does not mean you can’t write about something you did not actually experience firsthand; only make sure that you breathe life into it. Otherwise it is two times removed and you are not present.
Be Specific

Be specific. Don’t say “fruit.” Tell what kind of fruit—“It is a pomegranate.” Give things the dignity of their names. Just as with human beings, it is rude to say, “Hey, girl, get in line.” That “girl” has a name. (As a matter of fact, if she’s at least twenty years old, she’s a woman, not a “girl” at all.) Things, too, have names. It is much better to say “the geranium in the window” than “the flower in the window.” “Geranium”—that one word gives us a much more specific picture. It penetrates more deeply into the beingness of that flower. It immediately gives us the scene by the window—red petals, green circular leaves, all straining toward sunlight.

About ten years ago I decided I had to learn the names of plants and flowers in my environment. I bought a book on them and walked down the tree-lined streets of Boulder, examining leaf, bark, and seed, trying to match them up with their descriptions and names in the book. Maple, elm, oak, locust. I usually tried to cheat by asking people working in their yards the names of the flowers and trees growing there. I was amazed how few people had any idea of the names of the live beings inhabiting their little plot of land.

When we know the name of something, it brings us closer to the ground. It takes the blur out of our mind; it connects us to the earth. If I walk down the street and see “dogwood,” “forsythia,” I feel more friendly toward the environment. I am noticing what is around me and can name it. It makes me more awake.

If you read the poems of William Carlos Williams, you will see how specific he is about plants, trees, flowers—chicory, daisy, locust, poplar, quince, primrose, black-eyed Susan, lilacs—each has its own integrity. Williams says, “Write what’s in front of your nose.” It’s good for us to know what is in front of our nose. Not just “daisy,” but how the flower is in the season we are looking at it—“The dayeye hugging the earth/in August... browned./green and pointed scales/armor his yellow.” Continue to hone your awareness: to the name, to the month, to the day, and finally to the moment.

Williams also says: “No idea, but in things.” Study what is “in front of your nose.” By saying “geranium” instead of “flower,” you are penetrating more deeply into the present and being there. The closer we can get to what’s in front of our nose, the more it can teach us everything. “To see the World in a Grain of Sand, and a heaven in a Wild Flower...”

In writing groups and classes too, it is good to quickly learn the names of all the other group members. It helps to ground you in the group and make you more attentive to each other’s work.

Learn the names of everything: birds, cheese, tractors, cars, buildings. A writer is all at once everything—an architect, French cook, farmer—and at the same time, a writer is none of these things.
Go Further

Push yourself beyond when you think you are done with what you have to say. Go a little further. Sometimes when you think you are done, it is just the edge of beginning. Probably that's why we decide we're done. It's getting too scary. We are touching down onto something real. It is beyond the point when you think you are done that often something strong comes out.

I remember one student whose mother had died of cancer. She would write one side of a page about it—simple, good prose—and then she would quit. When she read those pieces in class, I always felt there was more and told her so. She smiled and said, “Well, the ten minutes were up.” Write to the eleventh minute if you need to. I know it can be frightening and a real loss of control, but I promise you, you can go through to the other side and actually come out singing. You might cry a little before the singing, but that is okay. Just keep your hand moving as you are feeling. Often, as I write my best pieces, my heart is breaking.

When I teach writing to young kids, many times they will write short stories with very complicated story lines, and instead of pushing themselves to resolve the story, they use the trick “And then I woke up!” When you continue to stop yourself from going all the way in your writing and coming to a deep resolution, it’s not a dream you wake up from, but you carry the nightmare out into the streets. Writing gives you a great opportunity to swim through to freedom.

Even if you have pushed yourself and feel you’ve broken through, push yourself further. If you are on, ride that wave as long as
you can. Don’t stop in the middle. That moment won’t come back exactly in that way again, and it will take much more time trying to finish a piece later on than completing it now.

I give this advice out of pure experience. Go further than you think you can.
Claim Your Writing

Time and time again, I have experienced a peculiar phenomena in writing groups. Someone will write something extraordinary and then have no idea about its quality. It doesn’t matter how much I may rave about it or the other people in the group give positive feedback; the writer cannot connect with the fact that it is good writing. He doesn’t deny it; he just sits there bewildered and later, through the grapevine, I hear that he never believed a word of what was said. It’s been over years that I have observed this; it isn’t just one downtrodden, insecure character in one writing group that has not been awake to his own good writing.

We have trouble connecting with our own confident writing voice that is inside all of us, and even when we do connect and write well, we don’t claim it. I am not saying that everyone is Shakespeare, but I am saying everyone has a genuine voice that can express his or her life with honest dignity and detail. There seems to be a gap between the greatness we are capable of and the way we see ourselves and, therefore, see our work.

The first time I became deeply aware of this was six years ago in a writing group I taught for eight weeks as a benefit for the Minnesota Zen Center. We all wrote about our family in simple, childlike terms—that was the assignment. We had fifteen minutes to write. There were twelve of us. When the time was up, we went around and each read what we had just written. I was the last one to read. The piece I read I later typed up and entitled “Slow Seeing the World Go Round,” about my grandmother drinking water, raising children, and leaving the world without socks, salamis, or salt. After I read, there was silence for a long time.

Everything I say as a teacher is ultimately aimed at people trusting their own voice and writing from it. I try different angles and tricks. Once they do break through, all I teach is dressing on a turkey. The turkey is already roasting. I felt peaceful and happy; each student in the group had broken through resistance to a genuine, deeply felt piece of writing. There was nothing more I could say.

Suddenly, I looked around the room and everyone was watching me curiously, waiting to go on to another exercise. I was astounded. I realized none of them had any awareness of what they had just written. “None of you know that right now you wrote something very alive, do you?” They just kept looking at me.

This is not true only of beginning students. I am thinking now of two examples. One woman is a poet; she is very good and also very well loved. I call her the Darling of Minnesota. She writes about her life, her minister father, her seven sons, the breakfast table. At her last reading not only were all the seats filled, but they had sold out standing room. She told me that when the reading was over she went home very depressed because they had all liked her poetry so well. She said, “I fooled another crowd with my work.”

The other example was a writer in one of my Sunday-night groups. She was a novelist and the assistant editor of a city magazine and had written two very successful plays; one was named Critics’ Choice by the Minneapolis Tribune. She wrote several extraordinary pieces during timed writing in the group. I thought for sure she would know their quality—after all, she was an experienced writer. When I met her a month later for breakfast and commented about one of her pieces, she was amazed that I thought it was good. (Good wasn’t the word for how good it was.) I was surprised that she herself didn’t know. All her professional
writing had been about subjects other than herself and her life's experiences. She said, "This kind of writing is all of you," so she couldn't see it.

Katagiri Roshi once said to me, "We are all Buddha. I can see you are Buddha. You don't believe me. When you see you are Buddha, you will be awake. That's what enlightenment is." It is very difficult for us to comprehend and value our own lives. It is much easier for us to see things outside ourselves. In the process of claiming our own good writing, we are chipping away at the blind gap between our own true nature and our conscious ability to see it. We learn to embrace ourselves as the fine creative human beings we are in the present. Occasionally, over time, we can see it: "Oh, I was good then," but it is in the past. We lag behind.

I do not mean for us all to become braggarts. I mean we should recognize that we are good inside and emanate our goodness and create something good outside us. That connection between our inner richness, our self-concept, and our work will give us a quiet peace and confidence that are hard for most artists to find. It is not "The work is bad and we are bad" or "The work is good and we are bad" or "The work is bad and we are good." It is "We are good and therefore we are capable of shining forth through our resistance to write well and claim it as our own." It is not as important for the world to claim it as it is to claim it for ourselves. That is the essential step. That will make us content. We are good, and when our work is good, it is good. We should acknowledge it and stand behind it.

Trust Yourself

In class Tuesday we went over two pages of someone's journal. The truth is it was my journal. Two pages of my journal. I selected them because I had pulled out a poem from those pages a few months ago. Not a great poem. A quiet poem. Those are tricky poems to find; they are the subtle hum in your notebook that can bring you into another world. I handed out copies of those two pages a week before. The students were to find the poem in them. They were also free to tell me if there was nothing there. "Nat, this is all junk."

Five or six students volunteered. There were at least four different versions of the poem. Some included the first half of the journal entry, some the middle, and one even picked up some overlapping work that was accidentally duplicated on the copy machine. There was one line they all included: "The hills of New Mexico are everywhere you go." All the versions sounded fine. None of them great poems, including the one I had chosen.

Give a piece to one hundred people, you could possibly get one hundred different opinions—not absolutely different, but lots of variations. This is where the depth of the relationship with yourself is so important. You should listen to what people say. Take in what they say. (Don't build a steel box around yourself.) Then make your own decision. It's your poem and your voice. There are no clear-cut rules; it is a relationship with yourself. What is it you wanted to say? What do you want to expose about yourself? Being naked in a piece is a loss of control. This is good. We're not in control anyway. People see you as you are. Sometimes we expose ourselves before we understand what we have
done. That's hard, but even more painful is to freeze up and expose nothing. Plus freezing up makes for terrible writing.

The best test of a piece is over time. If you're not sure of something, put it away for a while. Look at it six months later. Things will be more clear. You might find that there are poems you love and that no one else cares about. I have one poem about a window that anyone who hears it uncategorically says is terrible. I think it's brilliant. When they ask me for my Nobel Prize speech, I'll whip out that little gem and have my satisfaction.

Don't worry if you come back six months later and the piece you weren't sure of turns out to be terrible. The good parts are already decomposing in your compost pile. Something good will come out. Have patience.