

Introduction

How to stay limber, how to make the writing not grim, how to enjoy writing. How to make room in *real life* for a writing life. These are my goals. Are they yours, too?

I want my readers to be able to set up a positive, happy, easy writing life. One that is fun. I believe you can (and fairly quickly) create a writing life where the writing process itself is so enchanting and delicious, you want to write. You go to the desk willingly, stresslessly. In my dream vision for your writing life, you don't have to *make* yourself write. It's not work. It's not tedious or punishing. It's what you do. A happy productive writing life is like a simple, perfect dinner, or prayer and meditation. It's soul food.

So many of my students practice a weird, contorted relationship to writing. In fact, many of the (struggling) writers I know have adopted or internalized a bunch of rules that they then proceed to break every single day. They set up regimens, word counts, page goals. They nurture secret fantasies of prizes and publications. Then, they say they aren't disciplined. They say they are lazy. They say they have a terrible procrastination problem. They claim they want to write, and they act as though they can't understand why they don't write. Ultimately, they don't write very much, but they wish to, very badly.

I'm surrounded by non-writer want-to-be-writers. Probably, you are too. I see so many of my students, friends, and colleagues pushing themselves lower, lower, lower. I

saw my mom do it. My dad does it. My students do it. So many of us use writing as a way to keep ourselves down, limited, stuck.

This book aims to help the person who wants to write learn how to simplify and clarify the habits and states of mind conducive to writing. It's easy to use mystery as an excuse. It's tempting to say we don't understand the muse, the artistic process, greatness. But really, we do. My hope is that I can present, in practical chapters, a course of lessons that will help stuck, nervous, scared, lazy writers (is that not *all* of us?) break through to their best material, and welcome into their lives a writing practice that feeds rather than sucks and demands.

Almost anyone can write good stuff.

It's a matter of sitting down, conjuring a state of complete dedication and complete openness, and writing. Putting pen to page.

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Okay. So, I know. This writing business—it's really, really hard to do. Like anything that looks effortless and beautiful—cliff-diving, horse-racing, dance—writing takes an almost inhuman ability to focus. Creating a writing life requires growth and self-knowledge on your part. There will be bumps in the road as you become a writer: parts that are boring, lonely, tedious, silly, selfish, and extremely frustrating. That's all a part of writing. And in truth, writing is the most difficult thing I do in a day. But it's not

the writing that is so hard. Good writing *will* flow out of us, easily. It's the set up, the preparation, the habits of mind, the thoughts you think before and during your writing—that's what is so hard to get right. Preparing is complex. Writing is simple.

My method asks you to look gently at what you love. If you love writing, it helps you stay in a good mood, a happy mood. Writing helps you know who you are, and how you think, and what you need. For many of us, it's not just a way to express, impress, or vent, it's a whole spiritual practice. The stuff you have to do to get good at writing is the exact same stuff you do when you want a relationship—with a lover, a parent, a child—to go well. It's how you become a better, healthier, more balanced person—it's the same work, this work we have to do to become “real” writers.

The life part is hard.

The writing part does not have to be hard.

Clearing out bad habits and weird mindsets can take a lot of bold confidence. What will come out of you once you are *ready* to write, once you are prepared to see writing as a *way* and not an end to something? I don't know. That's between you, the muse, and your compost pile of fabulous material.

What I can teach you is how to set up your life in a clear way so you can actually get some writing done. I want to help people keep the pleasure in writing. I want to help people avoid a lot of the dull mind games that come with trying to make a writing life. (That those same traps sabotage other areas of our life, love, and work is the topic of a number of other books—see the appendix.)

So, here's my proposal:

Invite yourself into your writing life like you invite a lover upstairs. Want to see my best stuff? Want to play, all night, want me to lavish myself on you?

That is the right attitude toward your new writing life. Seductive, pleasure-seeking, and fun.

Now, you might be a shy lover. You might not wear satin, red slinky things. Or, you might be a monogamous, in-the-dark-only quiet kind of person. You might be wild on the page, and quite conservative in your daily life.

You might be bold in bed, and feel like you are really good, and why has no one discovered this and married/published you?

Well.

Good writers are writers with a few tricks up their sleeves. I want to show you some of the sleeves and some of the tricks. I want to show you that your tricks—for staying in your writing chair, for getting there in the first place—are ones you will need to keep sharpened. Your whole life.

In *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg says that “to do writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life.” In *Page After Page*, by showing how I have navigated, for better and for worse, the challenges of writing, working, teaching, publishing, loving, friending, owning a dog, doing laundry, I hope to inspire you to first get past your initial, perfectly normal counterproductive resistance, and on to words, your words, on the pages.

Your words, your pages.

The lessons here are the ones I learn again and again. This book is also a kind of autobiography of my last fifteen years writing and teaching and publishing. An alternative title could be *Girl Poet Takes on the University Life!* It's in part my coming of age memoir, a book about how I learned to learn. It's also a window into my classroom, where I hope you, alongside my students, will learn how to take useful lessons from any class, any teacher.

The chapters in this book explain how I found out what kind of writing life was right for me, and what kinds of exercises and books I found useful along the way. This book is, I hope, like sitting down with me, in my living room, over tea. I'll tell you my story and ask you for yours, dragging books and writing down off the shelves. You might be looking over my shoulder at the wonderful art on my walls. I'll say this: try to get past your taste. Try to learn from *everything*.

Every writer is a little different. But all people who write have similar fears and blocks about writing. Most of my writing students fall into predictable pits and traps. I want to tell you what I know about the writing path, and, I hope, give you some equipment so you can build bridges over the traps. There are fabulous treasures and wondrous rewards and great wise people along the way.

How do we begin?

By writing!

Part One

Blank Pages: Preparing Your New Writing Self

Chapter One

The First Day

The first day of anything is strange and wonderful and exciting. You want to write. You sit down with a new book (like this one!) on the writing life. You think *this will be good*.

But starting something new is often difficult and annoying. It's never exactly what you expected.

Yet another book on how to write. You don't really like these books. Or, the book is okay, but you still aren't *writing*. You take a writing class. Your fellow students are not great writers. They are perhaps irritating, pompous, or speaking in clichés. The teacher is a little...weird.

My first day in a new yoga class is always all about trying to like the teacher—*he is not like my old teacher*. He is the new teacher. He seems a little sweaty, a little large. I always think: I am not going to like this. I always think: this is not what I need. He will never understand. I am always nervous on the first day, and my nervousness takes the form of *disliking the teacher*.

I have taught many writing workshops, and on the first day there is always this funny dynamic. A kind of love/hate, push-me/pull-you energy.

Recently I taught a group of retired women, women who wanted to start writing. On the first Saturday morning, we were all gathered in the little basement room where class would meet each week.

We introduced ourselves, and then I said in my perky friendly way, “Okay, let’s warm up. We’re going to write *a lot* today. And don’t worry if your writing is terrible.”

“This is not a good exercise,” the tall, beautiful woman in the front row said a few minutes into our writing.

“I don’t understand what you want.” Her friend repeated this. “I don’t understand what you want from us!”

The beautiful tall woman pulled at the collar on her crisp white blouse, and smoothed her hair. She was frustrated, and she wasn’t writing. She put her pencil in her perfect lipstick red mouth. She, and all the women, glared at me.

I smiled at the women, and nodded. *This is resistance*, I thought. This was me just last Monday night in yoga class. I continued with the writing practice I was trying to get my students to do. “Try to listen to your thoughts, instead of thinking, instead of driving them. Try to let them come up, from deep inside you. Write those down. Writing is more a *listening* activity than a performing action.”

A few minutes later, I noticed in the back row a very quiet woman, reading through my handouts. She wasn’t writing, either. She looked up, a kind of scared rabbit look in her soft brown eyes. She said softly, “This class is going to be really time-consuming. I don’t think it’s realistic. Not realistic at all! We have lives!”

“Really!” said the two friends.

“This is just not what I expected,” a yellow sweat suit-wearing woman chimed in.
“Not at all what I thought it’d be like.”

All my students want to *want* to learn to write. Just like when we go to any workshop or class, or even on a date. We want to write, we really, really do. We have fabulous intentions. We prepare, with notebooks, pens, books on writing (or cologne, a new outfit). We walk into new situations, new endeavors, ready and willing. New writing books, websites, teachers, ideas—yes!

And we often run out, screaming our heads off. *That was terrible! That was not what I wanted.*

Isn’t it funny how quickly our resistance rises?

In our minds, it is so easy to say yes—*yes*, I will meditate; *yes* I will be calm and not yell at my family members/roommates; *yes* I will walk thirty minutes every day; *yes* I will eat more fiber; *yes* I will write, I will write, I will write. In our minds we say: I’ll incorporate more writing, better writing, into my life.

Then, when it comes down to doing the new thing, we say **NO**.

In so many ways, big and small, we say no. Can’t do it.

The thing we want seems good in our head; the reality of practicing it feels very different. We tend to sketch out how things *should be* and then they play out quite differently. We don’t like that.

I want to learn to write (date better caliber people/do yoga/swim/stop smoking/play squash/stop being so busy).

But not this way.

I want to learn the new thing. Not in *this* way.

That's how it was, exactly, for me. I wanted to learn some more yoga techniques. I signed up for class, and paid in advance. I bought a new sticky mat, and another book on yoga. I went to my first class. I sat cross-legged. I wanted to learn yoga. But not *from that teacher who was chubby and odd and not really very good.*

I ended up dropping out of yoga after three sessions. And, I wish someone would have told me along time ago: whenever you take a class or buy a book or start a new endeavor, it won't be how you expect. You have to figure out how to learn from that class. That book. That particular endeavor. You have to let it teach you.

Resistance is our way of shutting down fear. Fear is unpleasant. We avoid it—that makes sense. It is delicious to blame the chubby, sweaty, not-great yoga teacher. To insist we need Better Instruction. That sounds really, really convincing and good.

But what happens is not good: I didn't do any yoga. I'm still not better at yoga. I took a Pilates class, and I didn't like that teacher either!

Resistance is a powerful, pervasive, energy-blocking force.

To weaken it, simply shine a little light in there.

On the first day you take on anything new, here is what you can expect—plan for it:

1. You *will* not like the tone/hair color/smell/shape/quality of the instruction.

You will feel you are wasting your money and your time. This is your desperate attempt to *get out of change*, which is very threatening to the Self. Here's what you do: Say thank

you for your concerns, but I'm going to go ahead and do my best work, in spite of the limitations of my new chosen direction.

2. You *will* doubt you are as good as the other people in the class/reading the book/sticking their butts up into the air. You will simultaneously feel you are significantly better than the other people. This is your ego. Shine light on it, which will quiet it down, and say: Comparing myself to others doesn't help me learn anything. I'm going to do my best work, and focus solely on my own self for the next twenty minutes, but thanks for the input!

3. You *will* have great intentions, and truly, when you buy this new writing book (exer-ball, ab-ercizer, diet journal, free weights, self-improvement tapes) you do imagine a whole new way of life, with you diligently working a new program. Intentions are good, but let's not focus on them, because their evil twin is resistance. You will probably have a push-me pull-you relationship with your early writing practice. Successful writers anticipate this. They cultivate the ability to be *aware of the mind* without being *sucked into their mind*.

On the first day of your new writing practice, you will feel exhilarated, inept, argumentative self-indulgent, bold, silly, inferior, brilliant, blessed, and confused. That's a lot of emotion to stir up. Plan on it—and set yourself up for a good first day by saying this:

Twenty minutes of writing.

No more. No less.

Try not to think very much.

Acknowledge the busy beehive of thoughts and fears quickly, and dismiss as much as you can. Thanks for the input, self, but I have this project, and I am going to go ahead and do this. I'll let you know if I need any more inner guidance. Right now, I think I'm fine!

The trick is: Don't think. Don't think much at all. Acknowledge the thinking machine, and move on quickly.

That's the great talent of the First Day.

On Your Page

This is your first day of your new writing life. You need paper. It doesn't matter what paper. You need a pen. This, and a willingness to be patient with your resistance, and learn about your own funny self, is all you need.

Pen, paper, desire.

Buy notebook paper, or use white paper, or use the back of the envelopes sitting in your desk drawer. Buy a leather journal from Italy, or a watercolor sketch pad—it doesn't matter—and be careful—the purchasing of office supplies is like saying *think*. You do not want to think.

You just need paper.

Please simplify this task.

Make three lists. 1) The qualities of your dream writing guidebook. What is covered? 2) The qualities of your dream writing class. What do you learn?

Make your lists as long as you can, leaving room to add things.

Then, the third list. You, as a writing student, a small new pupil. What are all your best student-like qualities? Who are you when you are learning, truly open, changing, growing? Make a long list of the attitudes you have when you are loving to learn something. What do you look like then? What are you wearing? What do you have in the palm of your hand?

If you are having trouble, or feel tempted to do this exercise in your head, keeping mind the following:

1. Your mind will try to keep you from writing; you can easily outsmart it by keeping it busy with information-gathering tasks.
2. You already know, intuitively, everything you need to know about writing well, and writing regularly. The teacher you seek is within you! I know that sounds so new-age and *zazen* dumb, but it is true, and I will show you your way to this teacher. It's all you have, and all you need.
3. Excellent writers are very articulate about how they work, and why. Your first day is rightly devoted to making space in your brain, your soul, and your life for this new endeavor.

Like yoga, or dance, or cliff-diving, starting a writing life looks, to the outside world, to the non-writer, like nothing, so easy.

A man sits down at a desk, and writes some junk down on some scrap paper. How hard can it be.

It's really hard.

Maybe the hardest thing you have done so far.