

BOOK REVIEWS



Natalie Goldberg, *Let the Whole Thundering World Come Home: A Memoir* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2018), 194 pp.

When Natalie Goldberg (early 70s, Jewish background, Zen practitioner, writer, teacher, painter, partnered with a woman) was diagnosed with cancer, she was awakened to the reality of her own mortality in a way that she had not been even after years of Zen practice. In her words, “I felt so out there alone on a ledge” (xii). What she craved in the face of that awakening was the “nitty-gritty” experience of people who had gone before her down this path of the previously unknown—“hospital rooms, procedures, institutions, fast decisions, medicines I never heard of before” (xii). What helped her was when people shared their real stories, their real emotions, and she found very little of this in books. So, on the other side of her treatment, she set out to add to the small existing collection. “I want to say *we are not crazy*. This too is part of life. Don’t give up. Pay attention . . . We can be awake on both sides of the coin, in sickness and in health, in light and in the dark. In both states we can glow” (xii-xiii).

The book opens with a poem by the author, a preface outlining her experience and intention, six titled sections (*We Won’t Last Forever*, *This Was My Life*, *Here Was My Beloved’s Life*, *Down to the Marrow*, *Closer to Death*, *Endlessly Like a River*), an afterword, and a meditation on metta that includes the loving-kindness chant by Maylie Scott that Natalie used for herself early on and references in the book. At the beginning of each section is a story about Natalie visiting the grave of a beloved person, writer, or poet in her life—facing her own mortality she pays her respects to death and the dead who have left a mark on her life.

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While Natalie was going through her cancer treatments, she wrote another book, *The Great Spring*, which is a collection of some of her previous writings and new essays. Not knowing if she would survive the disease or treatment, she started working on her legacy, her desire to leave a mark and to record that she had lived and loved and mattered. Her writings, including this memoir, have left a mark on me and have inspired me as a spiritual care provider and practitioner, an artist, and a human.

Natalie is unabashedly honest in her writing, and in this unabashed book of revelation I went looking for her soft side, her tenderness and vulnerability. It was hard to find, not because it is not there but because it is covered by layers upon layers of rich reflection. I wondered, who did she allow to sit with her pain? Her fears? She had an incredible support system, but with whom did she receive comfort? Who was her caregiver? Her beloved was also diagnosed with cancer during this time. How much more did that make her feel alone? A bullsnake is welcomed close to her desolation as she lies down parallel to and face to face with this big and harmless creature in a vulnerable position on Cerro Gordo Road in California. Encouragingly, Natalie whispers face to face, "C'mon baby. Move, keep going" (112). Its "long gracious body" kept going, and Natalie, seemingly speaking kindly to her creature self as well, "wound [her] way up to standing" and carried on down the road (113).

As a chaplaincy educator in training, I have used this book to introduce new CPE students to the concept of a case study or verbatim without explaining this until the end. The students were assigned to read the book, and in class I gave them a sheet with writing prompts with this introduction: "Reflect through the eyes of a chaplain—imagine Natalie and her beloved and community are your patient and focus of care. You've been sitting with her, with them, and listening to their stories. Who is she? What grounds you to meet her in the gap between where she is and where she wants to be?"

Any individual or group hoping to make their empathy more accurate and expand their understanding of a person going through cancer treatment would benefit from reading this book. Anyone looking for a story about how an artist and teacher with a deep commitment to spiritual practice (in this case: writing, Zen, and painting) would find that Natalie navigated this journey with curiosity about whether these practices would see her through to a new frontier. Natalie hoped that, through her sharing, people would feel less alone on life's ledges. My hope is that as spiritual care

providers we will learn from her journey, practice traveling to the ledge of our own mortality, find the place of “complete peace and open space” (132) we can fall into, and meet people there.

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