

Writing as a Path to Awakening

A YEAR TO BECOMING
AN EXCELLENT WRITER AND
LIVING AN AWAKENED LIFE

Albert Flynn
DeSilver



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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January

{Rebirth}

Introduction: Writing as a Path to Awakening

Let's begin with a primal human question: *Who am I? Who am I, really?* "I cannot tell what I am, because words can describe only what I am not," said the twentieth-century Indian mystic Nisargadatta Maharaj in his book of conversations, *I Am That*.

We set off writing on the path to awakening by tuning into what we are not. "*Neti, neti,*" they say in India, "not this, not this." They say this as a process of negating that which is fleeting and untrue in order to access that which is divinely permanent and true. If we are not what words can describe, and words can describe pretty much everything in the physical/emotional universe, then what the heck are we? This is writing as a path to awakening's ultimate question, with the invitation to write and live your way into the answer.

Writing as a path to awakening is about how conscious living informs conscious writing (creativity) and, in turn, how conscious writing and creativity inform conscious living. It's one infinite loop—the helix of return. We begin with absences in January, in the "dead" of winter, burrowed inside our snow cave of the familiar, dreaming of courage to face the unknown, dreaming of transformation. We begin cold to our old story and become willing to let it go, aching to be reborn, willing to write our way into a new reality.



Speaking of old stories, and since throughout this book I will repeatedly ask you to be vulnerable and write into *your* own story, I figure I should set a good example right from the get-go. So here's an old story of mine.

I grew up in suburban Connecticut to distant and alcoholic parents who weren't really up for parenting, so they hired a governess named Miss Hedy. Remember Grendel from the epic poem *Beowulf*? That's Miss Hedy. She was a stubby monstrosity complete with chubby jowls, dark beady little eyes the color of a casket's shadow, and a head of mashed gray curls like tufts of ash. She wore a white starched nanny suit with vertical ribbed stripes that left imprints on my face when she pressed me to her giant bosom in a forced hug. If you could call that a hug. That was a rarity. Most of the time Miss Hedy barked commands and swatted at us, being strict, controlling, and eventually physically and emotionally abusive to my sisters and me. The only words I can remember coming from her mouth were "you should be ashamed of yourself." And for much of my life I was.

Between Mom's alcoholism, Dad's obliviousness, and Grendel's abuse, I started drinking at age twelve. By nineteen I was a committed binge drinker. There was a horrific night my freshman year of college where I was at a party with all my high school friends. I had just been recently dumped by my first college sweetheart. There were kegs; there was a kid in a trench coat wandering around with a bottle of Southern Comfort. I needed comforting. I drank far too many red plastic cups of keg beer and was riding the trench-coat coattails of Kid Southern Comfort. It wasn't long before I was stumbling around, spitting beer into people's breast pockets, asking for confirmation that they loved me (they clearly didn't), and generally making a complete ass of myself. I was finally chased from the house by the four hundredth person I had annoyed, and wound up staggering out into the driveway where I proceeded to black out face down on the asphalt. Nobody noticed I had gone, including my friend Mike, who at some point was done with the party and ready to drive home. He jumped into the car, cranked up Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young (was it "Carry On" or "Helpless" bleeding through the floorboards?)—and backed right over me!

Somehow he heard me screaming. He stopped the car, dragged my bleeding body into his parents' yellow Jetta, and drove us both drunk to the hospital. The next morning Mom and Dad were there white-knuckling the bedrails and looking at me as if I'd just robbed a bank. They were disappointed. "Son, we're very disappointed in you," they said. More shame. More drinking. It was a cycle that continued until another hospitalization a couple years later in Colorado, when I was also arrested for assault and battery. I won't go into the details of that cheerful story here, but you can read all about it in my memoir, *Beamish Boy*.

At a certain point, with the law on one side and a girlfriend threatening to leave on the other (bless her heart), I finally quit drinking. I moved to California to start anew. I met a new friend who was in something called "therapy." He'd known me for all of one week when he said, "Dude, *you* need therapy." From my wounded and delusional viewpoint, he appeared to be fairly well-adjusted, so I joined his therapy group. Turned out his therapy group was really a psychedelic therapy *cult* and I got sucked into the madness. There were no boundaries—the teachers were using illegal drugs with their "students" and having sex with a select few. It was a mess—but not without some redeeming qualities (I will share one of my favorite stories from that experience at the end of the book). But suffice it to say, I "escaped" the group and soon found my way to meditation. I eventually drummed up the courage to participate in a silent meditation retreat, which turned out to be way more terrifying and challenging than being blindfolded, told to eat giant bowlfuls of psychedelic mushrooms, and spending the next eight hours vomiting and losing my mind.

It was just a couple years later, after I had left the group, and I was in my midtwenties when I found myself on one of my first silent retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center with the Thai meditation master Ajahn Jumnian. I had been struggling for days at the retreat, overwhelmed by the incessant chatter in my head—the constant evaluation, judgment, opinion, and projections—when I thought I literally might have to simply pack up and bolt. I'd fallen in love with several practitioners and imagined having mad, sprawling passionate sex with them in the pile of *zafus* at the back of the room. I'd labeled

and judged the overweight people, ridiculed the skinny ones, pegged the lady with the blond hair and thick crimson makeup as a “trophy wife,” became righteous about the whisperers who broke the noble silence, and cursed the control freaks at mealtime obsessing over their special diets. The commentator in my head was on a rampage from external to internal self-judgment and back, over and over again ad nauseam. “I’m a dumb-ass shitty writer,” “I’m a mess,” “I can’t stay focused,” “I’m so bored,” “meditation is a stupid waste of time,” “I’m outta here,” “I’m a racist, a sexist, a classist, an ageist,” “I’ll never complete a book,” “why am I such a judgmental asshole?” etc. At a certain point, I couldn’t help to wonder: Was I always this judgmental? Where was all this judgment coming from?

After lunch on the fourth day I wandered off into the woods to do some lying-down meditation and hopefully fall asleep and make all this internal torment go away. I hiked into the small canyon and found a perfect flat spot of clean sand in the middle of a dry creek bed; I lay down and closed my eyes. I began by following my breath and then tried one of Ajahn’s body scans he had taught us the day before. I was drifting off into a deep and spacious meditative zone when my mind (and body) were overtaken by what I can only describe as a vision. It was similar to a spectacularly vivid dream at night, in which you wake up screaming or sweating, or at the very least are freaked out for days afterward because of the intense “reality” of it. The weird thing was, I was awake but clearly in an altered state of awareness after days of intensive meditation. It was not unlike one of the psychedelic “medicine journeys” with mushrooms I had done in the therapy cult, but without the side effects of nausea, vomiting, terror, and intense dread.

I find myself transported back in time to 1973 to the cold, tiled, downstairs hallway just outside the bedroom of my childhood home in Connecticut, which we called the Clock Tower in honor of the large clock adorning its Georgian façade. I’m four or five years old. Grendel, our vicious governess, is there. Her eyes are full of rage; venom is in her voice. She’s wearing a blue nightgown—torn, frayed, and full of holes. Instead of skin underneath that threadbare cloth I see tiny points of light and what appears to be smoke spilling through the tatters. The hallway

is dark and hazy. Miss Hedy screams at me, in some kind of apoplectic state, to pick up my clothes. She is ranting in a demonic German tongue. I can't understand what she's saying; it's just pure, garbled rage. It's as if all the words have gotten sliced into incoherent pieces on the rusty blade of her tongue and have shattered all around me. The sound is making my rib cage rattle.

Suddenly, she lunges at me and grabs my arm to show me what an incredible mess I've created. She yanks me into the pile of clothes, trying to push my face in it like she did with my cat, Snowy, that time he peed in my bedroom closet. But my arm breaks off in her hand. More frustrated than shocked, she throws it aside, blood spewing, like a cheap mop handle. Then she grabs my ear, which comes off in her grasp, peeled from my head with a slurping sound, and she tosses it aside like a grapefruit rind. Then she goes for my hair, tufts of it filling her sweaty palms as if she's pulling dead weeds. She attacks my other limbs, each time filled with a more virulent rage, until I'm reduced to a ragged, limbless stump. I'm just wobbling there—torn and bloody, utterly useless to her. She expands and bloats, turning from a fuming red to a dark purple, bursting the seams of her tattered nightgown. Suddenly, she explodes. And just like that, she vaporizes into a puff of pale blue smoke. She is cast into the Outer Void, beyond this world, and I am jarred awake.

I sat up in the creek bed, feeling the earth beneath me as if for the very first time; the air was crackling with the electricity of liberation. I was filled with a sensation of absolute release. A profound wave of freedom and complete relief overtook me—my body bright with the weight of sunlight. I grabbed onto a couple of large rocks to keep my body from drifting up into the canopy of trees. I found myself sobbing into the riverbed, the tears of a thousand lifetimes. I was convinced I'd just experienced an exorcism of sorts—something dark and metallic, horrific and sticky, had been ejected from my body, and along with it my story of abuse and abandonment, neglect and disconnection. That narrative of illusions burned up in the roiling blue smoke with Miss Hedy. And I realized in both body and mind that in some sense I'd been reborn. I was definitely *not* my story.



Back to that primal human question: Who am I? Am I this list of experiences, these memories of my childhood and young adulthood? Am I these feelings and emotions associated with those memories? Am I my opinions and beliefs? Am I even this flesh-and-bone body that will grow old and die? These are all examples of what words can describe. Remember what Maharaj says: “I cannot tell what I am, because words can describe only what I am not.”

What I discovered is that *I am that which makes language possible*—that which makes stories possible, that which makes joy, hope, and love possible; writing and poetry possible; that which makes all emotion and compassion possible. This is who we really are, who *you* really are—an open, poetic, living, breathing language-body of possibility! You are not your story; you are a field of possibility ready to be reborn!

TRY THIS What are the core transformative events of your life? I'm talking about the events that shaped your evolution as a character, a person—overtly dramatic events or intimate and quiet moments (something your father said that you never forgot) that shaped your very being. Write down a list of at least five major moments in your own life that shook you, emotionally and spiritually, to your core—events that signal points of transformation or rebirth in your life's narrative.

ON AWAKENING

The word *awakening* probably conjures up all sorts of images in your mind. Like with the words *nirvana* and *enlightenment*, we imagine peaceful sages filled with profound wisdom, wearing goldenrod-colored robes, wreaths of marigolds around their necks. Maybe you also imagine flowing gray beards spilling down their skinny chests, exotic locks rivering down their backs. Or maybe they have brightly shaved heads, eyes glowing in cosmic reverie or closed in sublime contemplation as they perch on thrones, cushions, the dirt floors of

austere caves. Perhaps they sit before thousands of adoring fans who have not yet achieved the profound state of (and usually *his*) eternal bliss. Our fantasy of an awakened person usually doesn't look like us. They don't wear our clothes, don't come from our culture, and don't possess our level of commitment to the spiritual path (assuming most of us have not chosen to live as ascetic monastics). Thank god they're just projections of our minds!

I believe there are three basic evolutionary steps of awakening consciousness. Broken down, they look like this:

Step 1 The concept of awakening. The first step is the *idea* of awakening. This idea includes everything that we think of as awakening or enlightenment—all the images, thoughts, and feelings we conjure up around the concept from what we've read, heard, and seen on TV and the Internet. This idea also includes any accumulated knowledge we might have about awakening, whether we read a snippet on a blog post somewhere or have been studying ancient texts for the last fifty years. Our idea of awakening is an essential first step: it engages us and draws us into a greater possibility for our heart and mind. It reminds us that we can be more expansive and inclusive in our sense of self. However, our idea of awakening is merely cursory.

Step 2 The energy of awakening. The second step of awakening occurs when we have an intense experience during yoga, meditation, chanting, or an extended period of silence. In this step, we actually feel a sensory experience of awakening in our body, wherein we release layers of emotional tension, grief, fear, longing, doubt, and anxiety. We might experience profound bodily sensations of shaking, tingling, floating, and even detaching from our body altogether. Some people describe this as bursts of kundalini energy shooting through the body, opening us up to clear, peaceful, and blissed-out states of awareness that can last minutes, days, or

even years. Not to belittle or underestimate their profundity, but ultimately these physical states dissipate and change. We eventually return to our body, to familiar mind-states and changing moods.

Step 3 Full surrender. The third evolutionary step of awakening happens when we completely surrender—we let go beyond thought, body, and experience itself. This nonexperience is what yogis refer to as the *deathless state*—the state of pure consciousness, pure potentiality. There are few living embodied examples of this state and it’s virtually impossible to talk about because it can’t be described with words. However, as mentioned before, this state *makes* language possible, makes experience possible, makes consciousness itself possible. Someone embodying such a state reflects back a steady stream of light and love. When you’re in the presence of someone like this, you never feel any resistance, ego, agenda, or need—this is a being whose soul intent is to radiate pure clarity, compassion, and joy.

When I use the word *awakening* in this book, I mostly mean the development of mindfulness, the evolutionary process of expanding consciousness, and *not* a perfected static state of bliss. We are “perfect” in every moment, in every stage of our lives—in our grief and anger as well as in our excitement and joy. Part of what makes us truly human are our foibles and mistakes along the path of an evolutionary enlightenment. This is where communication comes in—how we speak or write forth our experiences in infinitely varied ways is endlessly fascinating to me.

What I have personally discovered is that there is no “getting there”—we are “there” at every moment, though we may feel that we are *more* “there” at certain times than others. All experience is spiritual experience, and for me that especially holds true for the writing experience. That’s the simple message of this book. When we wake up to that simple truth, we become awakened in our creativity and in each aspect of our daily lives. I’m not just saying this to let you off the hook easily.

We still have to show up fully and take responsibility for our emotional responses, all the while remembering that this whole conundrum is an evolutionary practice. We are opening up in stages depending on how willing and available we are to the process of surrendering to the mystery of awareness in any given moment.

Many people have spiritual experiences at different times in their lives. Often people describe being filled with light or feeling charged with divine energy. They report feeling an infinite permeability, merging with the holy, becoming infused with an “unbearable lightness of being,” to quote the great Czech writer Milan Kundera. Some people recount the sensation of leaving their bodies, floating up to the ceiling or sky. Some people relate near-death or full-death experiences with eventual returns to embodiment. These episodes can also happen during periods of profound grief or depression, in dreams, under extreme physical duress, or at moments of severe injury. They can occur during energetically charged situations, during intense sexual experiences, while giving birth, or while witnessing a birth. They can take place after days of being in silent retreat at a Zen center, or singing Christian hymns, or participating in a Sufi dance, or gathering with others in Jewish prayer. They can happen at a Lakota Sun Dance, while out on a solo backpacking journey, or at a Grateful Dead (or pick your favorite band) concert. They can occur while skydiving, skiing, or swimming with the dolphins; while doing psychedelics at a session in “therapy” (see my book *Beamish Boy* for more on this), after reading a great poem, or while taking the bus to work. But what all these examples have in common is that they are *experiences*, which means they are temporary.

I don't want to minimize the importance or profundity of these experiences; rather, I want to highlight the fact that we are not our experiences—we are that which makes the experiences possible. It is so easy for our minds to interpret such occurrences as “the real deal,” as some ongoing kind of truth, but they are merely fleeting. The human mind grabs on and attaches to them because of the physical/emotional surge in awareness—we feel incredible, we feel alive and connected, transported to a higher level of consciousness! So we connect to spirit,

but then we come back down. The concert is over. We've had our orgasm. Now we have to feed the kids, deal with their tantrums, and put them through college. The sun goes down and we get cold and hungry. Eventually we have to return to work, and we're back in our head navigating our daily life, stumbling around in the cathedral of the mundane and ordinary, right where we started.

The challenge is how to integrate such transcendent experiences into our daily life, so we don't forget who we really are: that essence of connected free spirit. And yet it's not that we're seeking to "get back there," wherever "there" is, or to repeat a blissful adventure, but rather to become more aware in our daily life, to become more awake right now. It is important to remember that all reality is divine reality. There is a physical component to our experiences that is as divine as any ethereal mystical reality we might feel in heightened states. It's really a question of integration and balance. And one of the best ways I've found to integrate such experiences is through the practice of writing.

The following chapters include exercises and practices to help you integrate and balance daily life mind with divine creativity mind. In each chapter, I've placed the meditation exercises first, because I always suggest beginning with the meditation as a point of intention, even as a point of prayer for receiving and generating poetic (writing) ideas. Have fun with these exercises—experiment and play. This book is intended to be a practical and inspirational guide to further inspire your writing and being along this magical path to awakening we call life.

ON WRITING

The practice of writing is an exploration of consciousness, a practice toward deeper self-awareness that moves us along the path of awakening to our true nature. The most profound spiritual teachers from around the world are often writers. From Sappho in the seventh century BCE to Pema Chödrön today, from Rumi in the thirteenth century, to Thomas Merton, Jack Kornfield, and the Dalai Lama, the written word has the power not only to inspire but also to awaken the very best in the human heart.