

# **'Beginner's Mind':**

## A Creative Writing Workshop

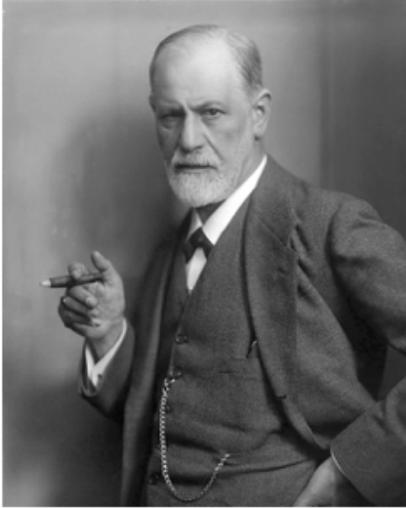
[cone of honesty, cone of candor, cone of compassion; colorful language OK, personal material OK. Will be taking a break roughly halfway through, may not go whole time.]  
[My background: wrote first story when I was 11; first attempt at a novel in 8th grade; dropped out of college after one year because I was reading; decided when I was 21 I wanted to be a writer. Started writing short stories, eventually got a job as an editor, finished my bachelor's degree, got an MFA in creative writing, taught undergrad fiction writing, did some freelance writing and editing, got a job as a writer and editor here. Published a couple of short stories and a poem, and one novel which you can buy on amazon. this workshop unites the two, bringing the principles of creative writing into the workplace. Janine's idea.]

## A creative spark



Photo by [Joshua Fuller](#) on [Unsplash](#)

[Janine told me what she wanted people to get out of this was a “creative spark.” We all have that spark but sometimes it gets trampled on by the pressures of life or our jobs, the pressures to conform that society unthinkingly subjects us to. We’re all constantly norming on each other, unconsciously checking in with each other to make sure we’re all still playing the societal game. We do have to play that game, it’s what makes society go, but there’s a cost.]



Credit: Max Halberstadt

**The man who first flung a word of abuse at his enemy instead of a spear was the founder of civilization.**

— Sigmund Freud, “On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena”

[Freud, a German psychologist, was the person who almost singlehandedly invented the discipline of psychology as we understand it today, along with psychotherapy. This is what Freud was getting at in this essay and in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*. We experience urges we cannot act upon without causing or risking great harm, so we suppress them, and that’s what causes neurosis, or hysterical phenomena. And it also suppresses our creativity because the wellspring of our creativity issues from the id or what Carl Jung would call the unconscious.]



**We find this in everyday life, where dilemmas are sometimes solved by the most surprising new propositions; many artists, philosophers and even scientists owe some of their best ideas to inspirations that appear suddenly from the unconscious.**

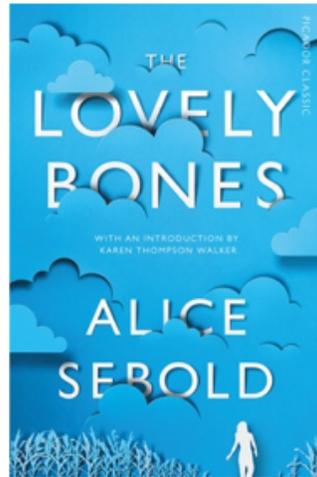
— Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

[Carl Jung (1875-1961) a Swiss doctor and psychologist. They both were the first in the modern West to become really interested in the relationship between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. Jung took a more positive view, regarding the unconscious not just as an occasionally problematic component of the psyche but also as a resource we can draw upon.]



**In everyone some kind of artist is hiding.**  
— Carl Jung, *C.G. Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters*

[It's important to realize that this is not just for the designated artists, the philosophers, the scientists. If you're human, you have an unconscious, which means you have access to this kind of inspiration. What we'll learn today are some ways to access the unconscious without having to wait for this inspiring material to appear suddenly; there are ways to go hunting for it. To bring all this back to writing, let's look at a novel written by an author I once met right here at NC State.]



[Has anyone read this book? It was a huge hit, became a movie directed by Peter Jackson, starring Saoirse Ronan. What's always stuck with me about this book are the first two sentences: "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973."

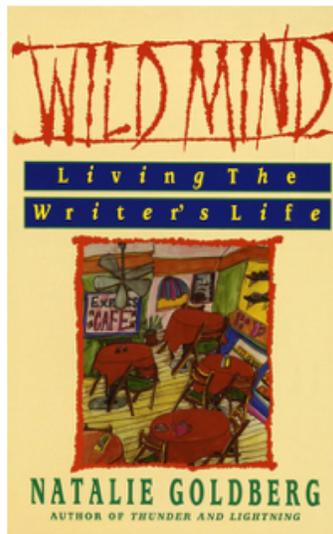
[She came to NC State and did a reading of the first chapter of her novel when I was in the MFA program here. After the reading she took questions from the audience, and one person said, "Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?" Her response was:]



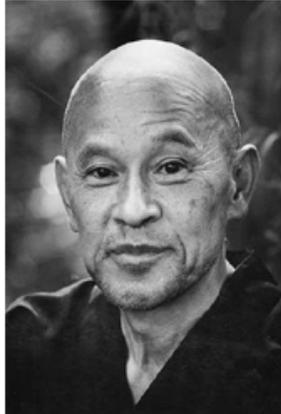
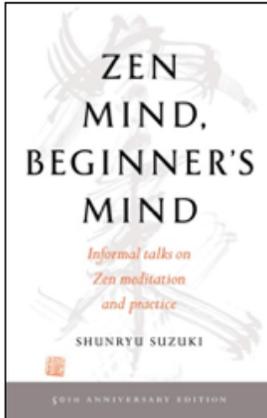
Credit: David Shankbone

**Inhabit your weirdness.**  
— Alice Sebold

[To inhabit your weirdness you have to find it. And when I was 23 years old, a college dropout working as a line cook in Florida, I decided I was leaving my humdrum life behind and went to go find my weirdness in Boulder, Colorado. My best friend and I moved out there to be writers together. Packed up everything we owned in our two small cars and headed out.]



[Natalie Goldberg was a Jewish writer who later became a Buddhist, and who used to live in Boulder, studied Tibetan Buddhism there; moved to Minneapolis and got into Zen Buddhism. Then wrote this book on writing, drawing on some of the principles of Buddhism.]



Credit: Robert Boni

**In the beginner's mind,  
there are many possibilities,  
but in the expert's there are  
few.**

— Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind,  
Beginner's Mind*

[Suzuki did more than anyone before him to popularize Zen Buddhism in the West. He founded the first Zen Buddhist monastery outside Asia, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, in 1967. This book, based on a series of lectures he gave, was published in 1970, the only book Suzuki published before died in 1971.]

## Rules for Creative Writing Practice

(Adapted from *Wild Mind* by Natalie Goldberg)

1. Write in response to a prompt.
2. Write for a set amount of time (10 minutes).
3. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation or how good the writing is.
4. Don't edit.
5. Keep the hand moving no matter what.

Strategies for if you get stuck:

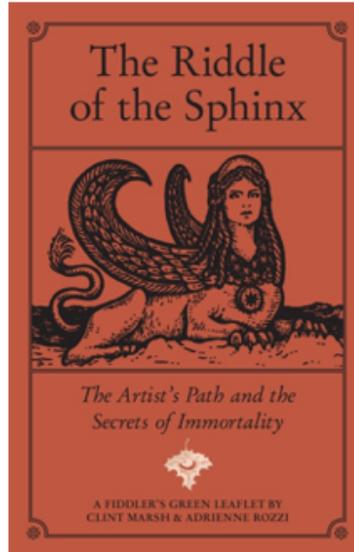
- Return to your prompt.
- "What I really want to say is ..."
- "I have nothing to say I have nothing to say ..."

**The purpose:  
to free the creator from the clutches  
of the editor.**

**Most of the time when we write, we mix up the editor and creator. Imagine your writing hand as the creator and the other hand as the editor. Now bring your two hands together and lock your fingers. This is what happens when we write.**

— Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind*

[This is why a lot of writing advice says to get a first draft down as quickly as possible, and go back and revise later. It's an attempt to separate out the purely creative function from the more coldly rational editorial function. SHITTY FIRST DRAFTS The idea here is that the creator is a tender-hearted creature that tends to quail in the face of criticism, so that if you're constantly trying to revise even as you're still in the initial stages of creation, you'll stifle your creativity, leading either to stilted, dull prose or a project that never gets finished. I've also heard it said not just for writing but for any creative endeavor that the initial stages of a project are not the time to criticize it because you'll strangle a potentially good idea in the crib, before it has a chance to mature and withstand criticism.]



[I picked this up at a pop-up art gallery a few weeks ago; not so hot on the immortality part, but I like what it says about art. It compares the artist's journey to the metaphor posed within the riddle of the sphinx. For those who don't remember, here it is: What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon and three feet in the evening? The answer is humankind. A baby crawls on all fours, an adult walks erect on two feet, and an elder walks with a staff.]

[The pamphlet theorizes that each artist has these three phases: crawling, walking, and using a staff, and in this piece the staff symbolizes the timeless wisdom that we come to with age. For our purposes, I want to say each piece of creative work passes through the same three phases: infancy, when its only job is to grow; adulthood, when the pressures of society force it to gain some attributes, lose others and improve in a certain useful way; and final maturity, when it reaches its final form, and the staff symbolizes not weakness but the strength that comes from integrating the pure creativity of childhood with the realistic criticism of adulthood. And so the entire point of today is to return to pure creativity, and reacquaint ourselves with that part of who we are.]

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- Return to your prompt.
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## Rules for Creative Writing Practice

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1. Write in response to a prompt: **Home**.
2. Write for a set amount of time (10 minutes).
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- Return to your prompt.
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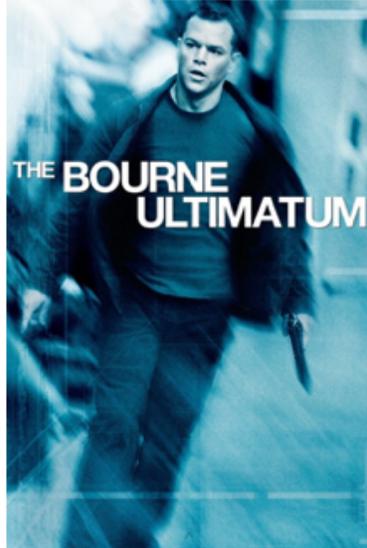
**Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy.**

— Carl Jung, *Collected Works* vol. 6

[What I'm hoping is that in being exposed to these ideas and this attitude toward the unconscious, to creativity, to fantasy, and by learning these practices, you'll develop a closer, friendlier relationship to your own unconscious and your own fantasy world that will help you be more creative in your work.]



[Here's an example of how I used a certain type of fantasy in my work. EXPLAIN ABOUT NUCLEAR ENGINEERING PACKAGE AND YOUR LACK OF INTEREST IN THE MATERIAL. NEUTRON PROPAGATION, MATHEMATICS, DATA ANALYTICS, "DIRTY BOMB." KEYED IN ON THAT PHRASE. SPUN A FANTASY FROM THERE. Where my mind went was a certain scene in this film:]



[I'm going to play the scene I was thinking of.]  
[PLAY "I HAVE A HIT ON ECHELON" SCENE]



[I tried to make the lead of my story as much like this part of this film as possible. Here's what I came up with.]  
[read out the beginning of the story]  
[The important part about this is that I was indulging my own proclivity for fantasy and inviting the reader to do the same. I was essentially making it okay for us all to fantasize about something that most of us find more interesting than neutron propagation or data analytics. I gave myself and the reader permission to fantasize, and when you have a robust enough relationship with your own unconscious, that's what you can do too.]

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