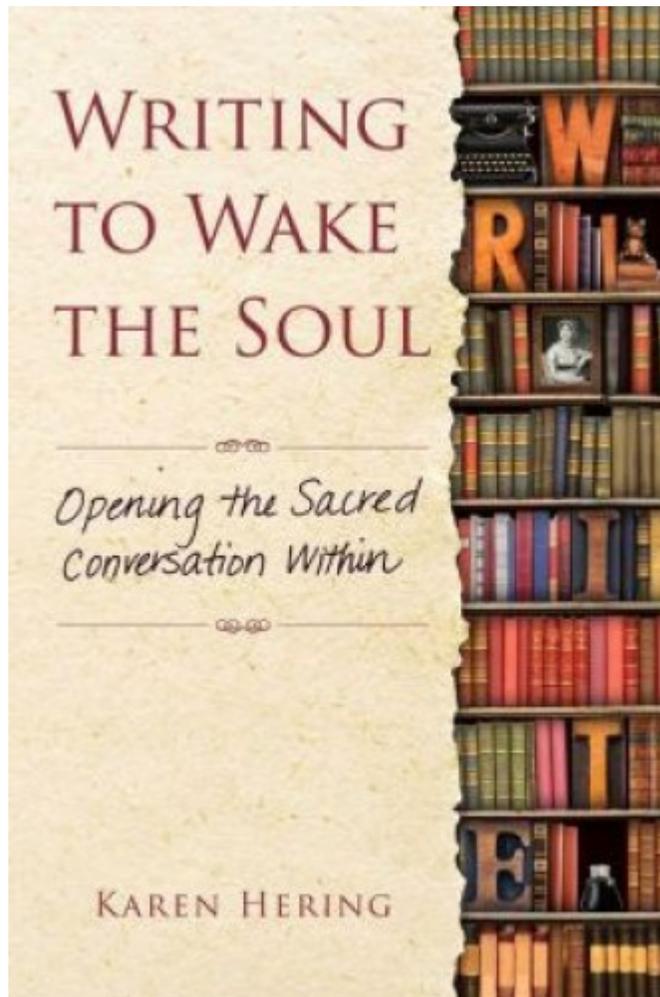


Writing to Wake the Soul, by Karen Hering

reviewed by [Cindy Crosby](#) in the [March 5, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Writing to Wake the Soul

By Karen Hering

Atria Books/Beyond Words

Did you check your smartphone when you woke up this morning? How about your e-mail? If you did, author Karen Hering says, you may have tuned out and turned away from your inner voice and the conversations you might have had with it. Whether

you consider yourself a writer or not, Hering believes that writing is a way to tune into that inner voice and discover the relationship you have with whom or what you believe in.

A Unitarian-Universalist minister who leads theologically themed writing workshops as part of her literary ministry, Faithful Words, Hering mixes a pastiche of quotes and guidance from Buddhists and Quakers, Sufis and Catholics to invite readers into a deeper relationship with writing. As the book unfolds, readers encounter wisdom from C. S. Lewis, Diane Ackerman, Sallie McFague, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, Islamic proverbs, and Jewish folklore. This diversity presents a welcoming face to readers from a multiplicity of religious backgrounds as well as those with no religious affiliation.

All you need to engage in the spiritual practice of writing, Hering says with disarming simplicity, is something to write with, something to write on, something to write about, and the intention to write. Ah, if only it were this easy! Hering smooths the way with tips for getting started, many of which will be familiar to those who regularly dip into books on writing. She recommends making a regular time and space for writing, opening up your senses, and engaging memory and imagination.

Many of us want to write but hear the nagging voice of our inner critic whenever we begin. Hering suggests that you send your inner critic out for a stroll or lower your standards. If you regularly write or meditate, this is advice you've heard before, but it is no less important.

Once you begin to write, be prepared to "trawl the deeper waters of consciousness and mystery," Hering says. Meaning is multilayered and multifaceted; "sometimes ambling practices of correlation, correspondence, and conversation will be far more effective paths for exploring truth than heading out determinedly on the narrow passages of fact-finding or one-way absolutes." The goal of this spiritual conversation with yourself, she says, is not more polished writing. Rather, it is "to open us to something just beyond what words can say and something just beyond us and what we know and see from our particular place and our particular time." She reminds us that "sometimes it helps to ask a question, even if it is unanswerable. Sometimes the answer isn't the point."

There's a fine tradition of books on writing with a spiritual center, among them *Writing—The Sacred Art* (Rami Shapiro and Aaron Shapiro), *Journal Keeping: Writing*

for Spiritual Growth (Luann Budd), and *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Natalie Goldberg). What sets Hering's book apart is its second half, in which she offers ten chapters with themed writing prompts on faith, prayer, sin, love, justice, redemption, grace, hope, reverence, and hospitality. One prompt that is missing and would have been welcome: forgiveness.

Hering suggests different methods to jump-start writing on these themes, from engaging in kinesthetic activities to using images to creating metaphors. She offers practical ideas as well as contemplative ones. One of the book's primary strengths are the pastoral meditations that open the prompts. By turns thoughtful, wise, and warm, they serve as solid preparation to putting pen to paper. The exercises are easily adaptable for individual or group use.

We write for many reasons: to make sense of our world, to know ourselves and our motivations, to understand whether we believe in God—and if so, what we believe and what to do about it. Our lives, Hering says, are open-ended narratives, as is “the larger story we are all writing together.” “Words are almost never enough,” she writes. “And yet, they are all we have.” Hering's words—pastoral, comfortable, and provocative—are excellent company.