

11 Tips to Living a Creative Life by Elizabeth Gilbert

Creativity is a tricky word. Consultants peddle it, brands promise it, we all strive for it, often without really knowing quite what “it” really is. Put simply, there’s a lot of snake oil around creativity. But now here’s author Elizabeth Gilbert (TED Talk, Your elusive creative genius) to cut through the guff with her distinctly refreshing take on the topic. For her, we’re all creative souls already, we just need to figure out how to harness inspiration and unleash the creative spirit within. Here, she shares her best pieces of advice for living a meaningfully creative life.

1. If you’re alive, you’re a creative person.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I don’t have a creative bone in my body.” It’s like somebody handed that person that placard to wear when they were nine, and they’ve been wearing it around their neck ever since. But rather than challenging them on that, because then they’ll dig in their heels, I ask them to take the word “creative” out of the sentence and replace it with the word “curious,” just to see how ridiculous it sounds. If you can just release yourself from the anxiety and burden that might be associated with the word “creativity,” because you’ve fallen for the myth that it only belongs to the special, the tormented and the professional, and you insert the word “curious,” you’ll see, in fact, that you are an enormously creative person, because all creativity begins with curiosity. And once you tap into your curiosity and allow yourself permission to follow it wherever it takes you, you will find very quickly that you are living a much more creative life than you were last year.

2. You’re not a genius, you have a genius.

The magical thinking that I use to engage with creativity is this idea that inspiration does not come from me, it comes to me. And the reason I choose to believe that is because one, that’s what it feels like, and two, that’s how pretty much every human being before the Age of Enlightenment described inspiration. Even really rational, scientific people will say, “And then this idea came to me.” They’ll use that language, even though if you were to push them on it they would then deny it and would tell you what part of their cerebral cortex it actually came from. In other words, they would disenchant it, and they would make it really boring rather than kind of Hogwarts-y, and I prefer to keep it Hogwarts-y because I feel like the only realm in our lives where it’s safe and actually beneficial to have magical thinking is in the realm of creativity.

3. Make something, do something, do anything.

If you have a creative mind, it’s a little bit like owning a border collie. You have to give it something to do or it will find something to do, and you will not like the thing it finds to do. So if you go to work and you leave your border collie unattended and unexercised in

your apartment, you're going to come home and find out that that border collie gave itself a job, and the job that it gave itself was probably to empty all of the stuffing out of your couch or to take every single piece of toilet paper off the roll, because it needs a job. A creative mind is exactly the same. My experience with having a creative mind is that if I don't give it a task, a ball to chase, a stick to run after, some ducks to herd, I don't know, something, it will turn on itself. It's really important for my mental health that I keep this dog running. So give your dog a job, and don't worry about whether the outcome is magnificent or eternal, whether it changes people's lives, whether it changes the world, whether it changes you, whether it's original, whether it's groundbreaking, whether it's marketable. Just give the dog a job, and you'll have a much happier life, regardless of how it turns out.

4. Stop complaining and get to work.

You will never hear more complaints than from people who live in creative fields. They are the most whingy, bitchy children that you're ever going to meet. And the sense of entitlement and anguish that comes out of those people's mouths makes me insane. You get to try to spend your life engaging with the absolute highest use of the human mind, and all you want to do is bitch about it? Shut up! No one made you do this. To act as though you're burdened by your gifts, and burdened by your talent and exhausted by your creative endeavors, as though you were committed to it by an evil dictator rather than having chosen it with your free will is also ridiculous. And finally, and worst of all, you're scaring inspiration away. Inspiration, like all of us, wants to be loved and appreciated, and if it hears you talking about how much it's ruining your life, it will take its business elsewhere. So whenever I hear creative people complaining about how it's a battlefield, and how they're bleeding over their work, and how awful it is, I always want to whisper to inspiration and be like, "Hey, if you're sick of her, just come over to me."

5. Frustration is not an interruption of the process, frustration is the process.

I have watched so many talented, creative, and inventive people rage against their work, or even worse, stop doing their work because of the frustration that they encountered along the path of whatever it was they were trying to create. And they speak of this frustration as though it is this obstacle from outer space that is ruining everything. All they wanted to do is be creative, and here comes frustration again, just taking all the fun out of it, making it impossible to do this work, and destroying the entire game. And my feeling is, "You guys, you're mistaking the whole process, because the thing that you're in love with, and that you've gotten infatuated with, is that moment in your creative process when everything is working — all the cylinders are firing at full speed, and the inspiration is flowing, and it feels really easy, and it's fun, and it's delightful." And that's the aberration. That moment of smooth, easy grace where everything is going great — that is not the normal. That is the miracle that happens every once in a while if you're very lucky. The frustration, the hard part, the obstacle, the insecurities, the difficulty, the "I don't know what to do with this thing now," that's the creative process. And if you want to do it without encountering frustration and difficulty, then you're not made for that line of work.

6. Let go of your fantasy of perfection.

Perfection is the death of all good things, perfection is the death of pleasure, it's the death of productivity, it's the death of efficiency, it's the death of joy. Perfection is just a bludgeon that goes around murdering everything good. Somebody once said I was disingenuous for saying this, because surely I try to make my work as good as it can be.

And that's absolutely true — but there's a really big difference between "as good as it can be" and perfection.

7. You can't get rid of fear, but do remember that fear is boring.

This is my fundamental opposition to the mythological dream of fearlessness, and the frustration I feel whenever fearlessness is held up as a virtue. I just feel like that it's the wrong battle. Because for one thing, you don't want to get rid of your fear; you need it to keep you alive. We're all here because we had fear that preserved us. So there's a little bit of a lack of appreciation for fear when we say that we want to be fearless. But then, fear is the oldest, deepest and least subtle part of our emotional life, and so therefore it's boring. It's dull. It doesn't have any nuance. So have a little conversation with your fear when it starts to get riled up when you're trying to do something creative. Let it know, "I'm just trying to write a poem, no one's going to die." But don't try to go to war against it, that's such a waste of energy. Just converse with it and then move on.

8. If something is authentic enough, it will feel original.

I am no fan of the aspiration to do original work. First of all, that creates an enormous amount of anxiety, and secondly, it is an impossible aspiration, because there's no such thing as original work. If you show me a piece of artwork that everybody heralds as being totally original, I will bring in ten academics and critics who will look at that work and tell you from where that person drew their inspiration, who they had been reading, what painter they had seen ... I'm much more interested in the chain of influence than I am in the narcissism of originality. The only way that you can create authentic work is to, with great humility and great faith and great curiosity, follow your own inquisitiveness, wherever it takes you, and trust that whatever comes out of you will feel original. That while other people may have done the same thing, you didn't do it yet, and as soon as you do it and put your mark on it, it will, by its own right, start to feel original, as long as it has that authentic heart.

9. If you're in the arts, you don't need graduate school.

Actually, let me rephrase that: If you're in the arts, you don't need debt. In fact, it's the last goddamn thing you need. So I don't care how prestigious the academy is, I don't care how magnificent the professors are, I don't care what they're promising they are going to give you; if they're giving you debt, they are not helping you. If you have an extra \$100,000 sitting around that you have nothing to do with, and you want to go to that school, I guarantee you you'll get wonderful things out of the experience, because there are fantastic experiences to be had there. If they gave you a full ride, and the school allows you to go there for free, again, go. Enjoy it, consider yourself lucky. But if they said to you, "We are going to bestow upon you this tremendous gift of the treasure of what our premier faculty here has to offer, but first you're going to have to go to a bank and take out \$150,000 in loans to become a poet," then I'm going to lay my body down in front of that bank door before I let you do that. I cannot strongly enough beg you not to do that. So it's not that I am against graduate school, it's that I am against crippling debt for people who want to live creative lives.

10. Creative fields make for crap careers.

People often say they want to go into a creative career, and then they try to do that, and

they end up in a place where the work that they are doing is not quite creative enough to really stimulate their soul, and it's not quite career enough to keep them financially stable. In other words, they kind of sacrifice both. My feeling is, stop trying to marry these two things, and separate them out. Choose your creative vocation, try to find the thing that brings your soul to animated life when you do it and do that thing on your own. Do that thing by any means necessary, turn yourself into it completely, and then find another way to pay the gas bill. When I was an up-and-coming writer, I decided very early on that I would be my own patron, my own studio wife, my own sugar daddy and that I would never demand that my writing provide for me in any way other than the only way that I know it always will, which is to please me and delight me and make me feel like I'm more than just a bystander and a consumer in the world.

11. Curiosity is the truth and the way of creative living.

Whenever you're told to "follow your passion," it can be very intimidating, and it can be very confusing, because sometimes passion isn't very clear, sometimes passions burn hot and then burn out, sometimes your passion changes, sometimes on a very sad Tuesday morning when you didn't sleep well, the idea of passion just feels so out of reach that you can't even imagine ever accessing it. And yet curiosity is this faithful, steadfast, friendly and accessible energy that is never far out of reach. There's never a day where you couldn't dredge up some tiny little fragment of interest in something in the world, no matter how modest it may seem, no matter how humble, no matter how much it might seem to be unconnected to anything else that you're doing, no matter how random. Passion demands full commitment out of you. You've got to get divorced, and shave your head, and change your name, and move to Nepal and start an orphanage. And maybe you don't need to do that this week. But curiosity doesn't take anything from you. Curiosity just gives, and all it gives you are clues, just a beautiful thread, a tiny little clue from the scavenger hunt that you're unique here in life.