

The Stubborn Gladness of Elizabeth Gilbert by Karen Bouris

Before *Eat, Pray, Love* was a movie and a travel tour, it was a memoir by the award-winning writer Elizabeth Gilbert, whose story of losing and finding herself resonates with just about every woman who looks in the mirror. With *Eat, Pray, Love* and its follow-up, *Committed*, Gilbert's connection to readers has been immediate and enduring. What woman hasn't sobbed in secret on the bathroom floor, after all?

Yet Gilbert is more than these two books. Her collection of short stories, *Pilgrims*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and her debut novel, *Stern Men*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book. Her 2009 TED Talk on creative genius, where she claimed mysticism and the divine as allies in the creative process, has been viewed nearly five million times. Currently, she is putting the final touches on her next novel, *The Signature of All Things*, due out October 2013.

You experienced enormous success, and then you moved to a small town and took up gardening. Why the retreat?

It was after the tsunami of *Eat, Pray, Love*, and it was quite literally grounding. This thing had happened in my life, which was every inch a blessing, but at the same time it was a challenge to try to meet it responsibly. I felt like I was on vigilant alert for about three or four years to make sure that I was receiving the gift of that popularity in the appropriate way, that I was being a good ambassador for the book. . . . I had to vibrate at a very high level. So when we moved to this little town and there was a little bit of garden, it was so healing to stop writing for a while, . . . then stop doing interviews. . . . My mom used to say that every day that goes by that you don't touch the earth, you are not really alive.

She is a gardener, and my dad is a Christmas tree farmer. We spent a lot of time touching the earth when we were kids, but I didn't enjoy it at the time. I wanted to be reading and writing plays and doing other things. That I came back home to that [connecting with the earth] was profoundly resettling. It was like rewinding a grandfather clock in some part of my soul, and it was a tremendous delight to realize that I know a lot more than I thought I knew about gardening—despite all my best efforts to not learn anything from my mother.

Do you feel that creativity and spirituality intermingle?

I think creativity is entirely a spiritual practice. It has defined my entire life to think of it that way. When I hear the way some people speak about their work, people who are in creative fields who either attack themselves, or attack their work, or treat it as a burden

rather than a blessing, or treat it as something that needs to be fought and defeated and beaten. . . . There is a war that people go to with their creative path that is very unfamiliar to me. To me, it feels like a holy calling and one that I am grateful for.

I can lay out the biography of it and say, “My parents are big readers, and they spent a lot of time in the library. And I had an older sister who is really creative, and we used to write plays.” I can even break it down and say, “I am really disciplined, and I work really hard, and I put decades of work into learning how to write.” And I could have put decades into playing a violin, yet I wasn’t going to become advanced. I took piano lessons for 10 years; I still can’t play very well.

I was given a contract, and the contract is: “We are not going to tell you why, but we gave you this capacity. Your side of the contract is that you must devote yourself to this in the highest possible manner, you must approach it with the greatest respect, and you must give your whole self to this. And then we will work with you on making progress.” That’s sort of what it feels like for me.

With the exception of the experience of four months of meditating in India in an ashram, there has never been anything in my life that’s even approximated the sense of the miraculous that I feel running deep in this work and the contract that has been played out. It’s beautiful.

You have written about how important self-forgiveness is in the creative process.

Oh my God, it’s so hard. And we are the last person we can forgive. But it’s necessary—even more than discipline, even more than inspiration—that gentleness [with yourself]. It’s the opposite of what we are taught about the big geniuses creating, with the furrowed brow and the sweat and thrashing and gnashing. There is always such a violence in it.

To me, the best work I have done is when I say to myself, Well, that was a good try. This isn’t a perfect story you just created, but that’s the best we are going to do today, and tomorrow we can pick it up again. When you see artists who lead their life on the battlefield, that’s a missing feature that causes the self-abuse and the torment and the alcoholism—

The archetype of the suffering artist.

It’s really strong, and I think it comes in part from the old Christian theology that you can only trust suffering and pain, and that all pleasure holds the possibility for sin. Only through lashing yourself and denying yourself all comforts can you be certain that you are actually living a serious life. I think it’s now a little out of date. I think it’s in need of a tune-up.

Why do you think that being creative or an artist has become a rarefied thing, something that “other people do” and not a part of our daily life?

A very good piece of fortune I had as a child was that I was raised by parents who had no faith whatsoever in professionals. To the point that they didn’t go to doctors when they had an eye infection and stuff like that. They take it to an extreme, that you don’t need a permission slip from the principal, that, really, you can do everything yourself. And while there is some pathology in that, it was also part of my childhood, seeing people who didn’t wait for permission to do something before they did it—whether it’s doing their own

plumbing or growing their own food or making their own clothing.

So I never had this obstacle that some people have. I felt like, I can write a book—you just write one. I think that [way of thinking] is from a different era, where people just felt that they were allowed to write a song, they were allowed to make a drawing. Now I spend a lot of time trying to talk people out of getting an MFA. Unless you have a trust fund or you have gotten the full scholarship and you have nothing else to do, you don't need an MFA to do this. You can just do this. But it's become a profession, and if you don't have the right accreditation from the right institution, you are not considered a professional artist. That's weird, that's just weird, and it's never been like that in history before now. I think it's contemporary, and I think it's also really American, and it's stopping a lot of people.

Yes—like we need to have permission or accreditation or a degree to be creative, instead of its being a part of who we are.

There is something really nutty and sad about that. My sister pointed out that something happens when we get to high school. She's noticed this with her kids and other kids, where they love to read and they love to write stories and they love to do stuff—and then you get to high school. All of a sudden they throw the Great Books at you, and they send you this message very clearly that the books that you have so far been enjoying have no value.

What are your spiritual or creative influences?

These days I am drawing most of my creative inspiration from poets. I feel like they bridge the gap between the literary world and the spiritual world because so often the poet's work is purely coming out of the stream. They really are walking around with a transistor radio getting messages. The poet Jack Gilbert, who just passed away, much to my sorrow, is as important to me as any guru that I have ever read. Ruth Stone is another one I love, love, love. These are people whose work I carry around with me the way other people would carry around a prayer book and who I return to for inspiration.

I have a mantra that I have used for meditation. It's a line of Jack Gilbert's: "We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world." That idea of 'stubborn gladness' is my meditation. I love that line because it doesn't deny suffering; it doesn't deny the existence of suffering; it doesn't deny that the world is a ruthless furnace. But there is a fierce insistence on staying awake and staying afloat in the midst of that, that I go back to again and again and again.

With *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Committed*, you were instantly connected to millions of women who felt that a part of your story was their story too. What is it like to have people feel connected to you in this way?

I am still trying to figure that out, to be honest. It's an evolving answer, and it means something different to me now than it meant to me six years ago, and it meant something different at the beginning than it did at the height, than it did in the aftermath. It's a relationship with living people, and all relationships with living people shift.

I have tried to let those readers know that their lives matter and their feelings matter and their voices matter and their passions matter. It's very joyful for me to see that the liberation I gave myself made them feel more free—not necessarily in the cases where people are traveling to eat pizza in Italy, then go to that ashram in India, then try to find the Brazilian guru in Bali. But when women will say simple things like, "You know, when I

read your book, it made me ask myself, Where is the joy in my life and what have I sacrificed it for?" And in most cases the reply isn't I have to leave my husband and go to India.

There was a woman who wrote me a letter and said, "I remember that the last time I ever felt that floating feeling of amazement was when I was 12 years old and I was figure skating. I was getting pretty good at it, and then my family moved and I stopped figure skating, and I realized that I never felt that way since." She was 45 years old, a mom with a full-time job, and she started getting up at five o'clock in the morning three days a week to take figure skating classes.

And the story doesn't end with her winning the gold medal at the Winter Olympics. It ends with her revisiting a way that she had felt joy at one point in her life. She had somehow forgotten that that door was still open. The value is extraordinary for me to know—that she gets to take that with her. So I'm honored, and there are a lot of stories like that, and it's almost beyond my comprehension to take in what that means.

Something about witnessing someone living an uncompromising life moves people in profound ways.

It's wonderful to have those reminders. It goes back to the idea of getting permission from the principal. We all keep waiting for the principal to recognize that there is no need for that. You are allowed. You are invited. You too are a child of God.