

ELIZABETH GILBERT

author of *EAT PRAY LOVE*

BIG
MAGIC

CREATIVE LIVING
BEYOND FEAR

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The Signature of All Things



Big Magic

Creative Living Beyond Fear



ELIZABETH GILBERT

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This one's for you, Rayya

Q: What is creativity?

A: The relationship between a human being and the mysteries of inspiration.

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Courage





Hidden Treasure

Once upon a time, there was a man named Jack Gilbert, who was not related to me—unfortunately for me.

Jack Gilbert was a great poet, but if you've never heard of him, don't worry about it. It's not your fault. He never much cared about being known. But I knew about him, and I loved him dearly from a respectful distance, so let me tell you about him.

Jack Gilbert was born in Pittsburgh in 1925 and grew up in the midst of that city's smoke, noise, and industry. He worked in factories and steel mills as a young man, but was called from an early age to write poetry. He answered the call without hesitation. He became a poet the way other men become monks: as a devotional practice, as an act of love, and as a lifelong commitment to the search for grace and transcendence. I think this is probably a very good way to become a poet. Or to become anything, really, that calls to your heart and brings you to life.

Jack could've been famous, but he wasn't into it. He had the talent and the charisma for fame, but he never had the interest. His first collection, published in 1962, won the prestigious Yale Younger Poets prize and was nominated for the Pulitzer. What's more, he won over audiences as well as critics, which is not an easy feat for a poet in the modern world. There was something about him that drew people in and kept them captivated. He was handsome, passionate, sexy, brilliant on stage. He was a magnet for women and an idol for men. He was photographed for *Vogue*, looking gorgeous and romantic. People were crazy about him. He could've been a rock star.

Instead, he disappeared. He didn't want to be distracted by too much commotion. Later in life he reported that he had found his fame boring—not because it was immoral or corrupting, but simply because it was exactly the same thing every day. He was looking for something richer, more textured, more varied. So he dropped out. He went to live in Europe and stayed there for twenty years. He lived for a while in Italy, a while in Denmark, but mostly he lived in a shepherd's hut on a mountaintop in Greece. There, he contemplated the eternal mysteries, watched the light

change, and wrote his poems in private. He had his love stories, his obstacles, his victories. He was happy. He got by somehow, making a living here and there. He needed little. He allowed his name to be forgotten.

After two decades, Jack Gilbert resurfaced and published another collection of poems. Again, the literary world fell in love with him. Again, he could have been famous. Again, he disappeared—this time for a decade. This would be his pattern always: isolation, followed by the publication of something sublime, followed by more isolation. He was like a rare orchid, with blooms separated by many years. He never promoted himself in the least. (In one of the few interviews he ever gave, Gilbert was asked how he thought his detachment from the publishing world had affected his career. He laughed and said, “I suppose it’s been fatal.”)

The only reason I ever heard of Jack Gilbert was that, quite late in his life, he returned to America and—for motives I will never know—took a temporary teaching position in the creative writing department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The following year, 2005, it happened that I took exactly the same job. (Around campus, they started jokingly calling the position “the Gilbert Chair.”) I found Jack Gilbert’s books in my office—the office that had once been his. It was almost like the room was still warm from his presence. I read his poems and was overcome by their grandeur, and by how much his writing reminded me of Whitman. (“We must risk delight,” he wrote. “We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.”)

He and I had the same surname, we’d held the same job, we had inhabited the same office, we had taught many of the same students, and now I was in love with his words; naturally enough, I became deeply curious about him. I asked around: Who was Jack Gilbert?

Students told me he was the most extraordinary man they’d ever encountered. He had seemed not quite of this world, they said. He seemed to live in a state of uninterrupted marvel, and he encouraged them to do the same. He didn’t so much teach them *how* to write poetry, they said, but *why*: because of delight. Because of stubborn gladness. He told them that they must live their most creative lives as a means of fighting back against the ruthless furnace of this world.

Most of all, though, he asked his students to be brave. Without bravery, he instructed, they would never be able to realize the vaulting scope of their own capacities. Without bravery, they would never know the world as richly

as it longs to be known. Without bravery, their lives would remain small—far smaller than they probably wanted their lives to be.

I never met Jack Gilbert myself, and now he is gone—he passed away in 2012. I probably could've made it a personal mission to seek him out and meet him while he was living, but I never really wanted to. (Experience has taught me to be careful of meeting my heroes in person; it can be terribly disappointing.) Anyway, I quite liked the way he lived inside my imagination as a massive and powerful presence, built out of his poems and the stories I'd heard about him. So I decided to know him only that way—through my imagination. And that's where he remains for me to this day: still alive inside me, completely internalized, almost as though I dreamed him up.

But I will never forget what the real Jack Gilbert told somebody else—an actual flesh-and-blood person, a shy University of Tennessee student. This young woman recounted to me that one afternoon, after his poetry class, Jack had taken her aside. He complimented her work, then asked what she wanted to do with her life. Hesitantly, she admitted that perhaps she wanted to be a writer.

He smiled at the girl with infinite compassion and asked, “Do you have the courage? Do you have the courage to bring forth this work? The treasures that are hidden inside you are hoping you will say *yes*.”

Creative Living, Defined

So this, I believe, is the central question upon which all creative living hinges: *Do you have the courage to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?*

Look, I don't know what's hidden within you. I have no way of knowing such a thing. You yourself may barely know, although I suspect you've caught glimpses. I don't know your capacities, your aspirations, your longings, your secret talents. But surely something wonderful is sheltered inside you. I say this with all confidence, because I happen to believe we are all walking repositories of buried treasure. I believe this is one of the oldest and most generous tricks the universe plays on us human beings,

both for its own amusement and for ours: The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them.

The hunt to uncover those jewels—that's creative living.

The courage to go on that hunt in the first place—that's what separates a mundane existence from a more enchanted one.

The often surprising results of that hunt—that's what I call Big Magic.

An Amplified Existence

When I talk about “creative living” here, please understand that I am not necessarily talking about pursuing a life that is professionally or exclusively devoted to the arts. I'm not saying that you must become a poet who lives on a mountaintop in Greece, or that you must perform at Carnegie Hall, or that you must win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. (Though if you want to attempt any of these feats, by all means, *have at it*. I love watching people swing for the bleachers.) No, when I refer to “creative living,” I am speaking more broadly. I'm talking about living a life that is driven more strongly by curiosity than by fear.

One of the coolest examples of creative living that I've seen in recent years, for instance, came from my friend Susan, who took up figure skating when she was forty years old. To be more precise, she actually already knew how to skate. She had competed in figure skating as a child and had always loved it, but she'd quit the sport during adolescence when it became clear she didn't have quite enough talent to be a champion. (Ah, lovely adolescence—when the “talented” are officially shunted off from the herd, thus putting the total burden of society's creative dreams on the thin shoulders of a few select souls, while condemning everyone else to live a more commonplace, inspiration-free existence! What a system . . .)

For the next quarter of a century, my friend Susan did not skate. Why bother, if you can't be the best? Then she turned forty. She was listless. She was restless. She felt drab and heavy. She did a little soul-searching, the way one does on the big birthdays. She asked herself when was the last time she'd felt truly light, joyous, and—yes—*creative* in her own skin. To her shock, she realized that it had been decades since she'd felt that way. In

fact, the last time she'd experienced such feelings had been as a teenager, back when she was still figure skating. She was appalled to discover that she had denied herself this life-affirming pursuit for so long, and she was curious to see if she still loved it.

So she followed her curiosity. She bought a pair of skates, found a rink, hired a coach. She ignored the voice within her that told her she was being self-indulgent and preposterous to do this crazy thing. She tamped down her feelings of extreme self-consciousness at being the only middle-aged woman on the ice, with all those tiny, feathery nine-year-old girls.

She just did it.

Three mornings a week, Susan awoke before dawn and, in that groggy hour before her demanding day job began, she skated. And she skated and skated and skated. And yes, she loved it, as much as ever. She loved it even more than ever, perhaps, because now, as an adult, she finally had the perspective to appreciate the value of her own joy. Skating made her feel alive and ageless. She stopped feeling like she was nothing more than a consumer, nothing more than the sum of her daily obligations and duties. She was making something of herself, making something *with* herself.

It was a revolution. A literal revolution, as she spun to life again on the ice—revolution upon revolution upon revolution . . .

Please note that my friend did not quit her job, did not sell her home, did not sever all her relationships and move to Toronto to study seventy hours a week with an exacting Olympic-level skating coach. And no, this story does not end with her winning any championship medals. It doesn't have to. In fact, this story does not end at all, because Susan is *still* figure skating several mornings a week—simply because skating is still the best way for her to unfold a certain beauty and transcendence within her life that she cannot seem to access in any other manner. And she would like to spend as much time as possible in such a state of transcendence while she is still here on earth.

That's all.

That's what I call creative living.

And while the paths and outcomes of creative living will vary wildly from person to person, I can guarantee you this: A creative life is an amplified life. It's a bigger life, a happier life, an expanded life, and a hell of a lot more interesting life. Living in this manner—continually and

stubbornly bringing forth the jewels that are hidden within you—is a fine art, in and of itself.

Because creative living is where Big Magic will always abide.

Scary, Scary, Scary

Let's talk about courage now.

If you already have the courage to bring forth the jewels that are hidden within you, terrific. You're probably already doing really interesting things with your life, and you don't need this book. Rock on.

But if you don't have the courage, let's try to get you some. Because creative living is a path for the brave. We all know this. And we all know that when courage dies, creativity dies with it. We all know that fear is a desolate boneyard where our dreams go to desiccate in the hot sun. This is common knowledge; sometimes we just don't know what to do about it.

Let me list for you some of the many ways in which you might be afraid to live a more creative life:

You're afraid you have no talent.

You're afraid you'll be rejected or criticized or ridiculed or misunderstood or—worst of all—ignored.

You're afraid there's no market for your creativity, and therefore no point in pursuing it.

You're afraid somebody else already did it better.

You're afraid everybody else already did it better.

You're afraid somebody will steal your ideas, so it's safer to keep them hidden forever in the dark.

You're afraid you won't be taken seriously.

You're afraid your work isn't politically, emotionally, or artistically important enough to change anyone's life.

You're afraid your dreams are embarrassing.

You're afraid that someday you'll look back on your creative endeavors as having been a giant waste of time, effort, and money.

You're afraid you don't have the right kind of discipline.

You're afraid you don't have the right kind of work space, or financial freedom, or empty hours in which to focus on invention or exploration.

You're afraid you don't have the right kind of training or degree.

You're afraid you're too fat. (I don't know what this has to do with creativity, exactly, but experience has taught me that most of us are afraid we're too fat, so let's just put that on the anxiety list, for good measure.)

You're afraid of being exposed as a hack, or a fool, or a dilettante, or a narcissist.

You're afraid of upsetting your family with what you may reveal.

You're afraid of what your peers and coworkers will say if you express your personal truth aloud.

You're afraid of unleashing your innermost demons, and you really don't want to encounter your innermost demons.

You're afraid your best work is behind you.

You're afraid you never had any best work to begin with.

You're afraid you neglected your creativity for so long that now you can never get it back.

You're afraid you're too old to start.

You're afraid you're too young to start.

You're afraid because something went well in your life once, so obviously nothing can ever go well again.

You're afraid because nothing has ever gone well in your life, so why bother trying?

You're afraid of being a one-hit wonder.

You're afraid of being a no-hit wonder . . .

Listen, I don't have all day here, so I'm not going to keep listing fears. It's a bottomless list, anyhow, and a depressing one. I'll just wrap up my summary this way: SCARY, SCARY, SCARY.

Everything is so goddamn scary.

Defending Your Weakness