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The author of the bestseller, *Big Magic* tells *Seasons* how her upbringing on a Litchfield farm set the stage for a passionate, creative life

Elizabeth Gilbert believes there's treasure inside you. It could be a novel, poem or song, or a knack for gardening, raising goats, traveling or repairing things. Though some people are well-aware of their gifts, others may need to unearth them. "The hunt to uncover those jewels, that's creative living," she says in her bestseller, *Big Magic* (Riverhead Books, 2015).

Gilbert's life, indeed, has a magical quality. Her 2006 memoir, *Eat Pray Love*, about her journeys to Italy, India and Indonesia after a

THE INTERVIEW: Elizabeth Gilbert

divorce, has been translated into 30 languages, spawned a wave of spiritual tourism, and became a movie starring Julia Roberts. Her many other works of nonfiction and fiction have garnered honors, including a nomination for the National Book Award. In addition to embracing her own creative gifts, she's helped others tap theirs through a TED Talk about creativity (10 million views), touring with Oprah ("The Life You Want" tour drew more than 100,000 fans), and debunking the idea that worthy art can only be made by an elite group of geniuses. "The guardians of high culture will try to convince you that the arts belong only to a chosen



CREATIVITY COACH: In *Big Magic*, Elizabeth Gilbert encourages readers to embrace curiosity. "The clock is ticking, and the world is spinning, and we simply do not have time anymore to think so small," she writes.

few,” she writes in *Big Magic*. “But they are wrong and they are also annoying. We are all the chosen few.”

In anticipation of her May 13 appearance (she will join actor Jeffrey Tambor and choreographer/dancer Bill T. Jones on the “Creative Artists” panel) at the Connecticut Forum, at The Bushnell in Hartford, Gilbert connected with *Seasons* about her childhood in Connecticut, the value of hardcover books, and how her Facebook page has led to moments of transcendence. Gilbert, who goes by Liz, emailed answers to *Seasons*’ questions from Tasmania, and the punctuation and capitalization are hers.

Q: You were born in Waterbury, then moved to Litchfield and graduated from Litchfield High School, class of 1987. How often do you get home for family or class reunions?

LG: Not as much as I used to! My parents now divide their time between the family Christmas tree farm in Litchfield, and a home outside of Philadelphia, which is very close to where my sister and I live. As a result, we don’t spend as much time together as a family up in Connecticut anymore. Philly has become the tribal gathering space. But Litchfield is very much my ancestral homeland. I think you can tell what your ancestral homeland is by what place in the world you dream about the most. Litchfield, the family farm, and the woods behind our house are still the major landscape for my dreams, and probably always will be. Especially those woods. Even as child, I was aware of a sense of that these New England woods were very beautiful, with their overgrown old stone walls, and babbling creeks. It always felt sort of mythic. I remember having a sense even as a ten-year-old that I was lucky to be surrounded by such loveliness and that sense has always stayed with me, no matter where I end of traveling or living.

Q: You grew up on the Litchfield Christmas tree farm Bees, Fleas & Trees, which your parents still own and operate. How did growing up on the farm impact your creativity?

LG: The greatest gift I ever had as a creative person was to have been raised by independent-thinking, independent-acting makers. My parents decided in 1973 that they wanted to move away from the suburbs and back to the land, and they created a life for themselves and their children that was everything that they dreamed — a big garden, a small farm, goats, chickens, beehives, and an old farmhouse that they renovated by hand. They didn’t ask anyone’s permission to do this; they just did it. And what I think was the best example for me was that they didn’t quit their day jobs to do all this. My dad still worked full time as an engineer, and my mother still worked part time as a nurse. They honored their financial



WAY BACK WHEN: Elizabeth, her sister, Catherine, and her parents, Carole and John Gilbert, at their Litchfield farm. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Gilbert

responsibilities by keeping their official careers, but in their free time, they created the world that they wanted to live in. It wasn’t easy; running a farm is a lot of work, but they loved it — and that love and passion gave them the energy they needed to create the life they wanted. What I grew up seeing was this lesson: What you do for a living does not have to be the same thing as what you do for a LIFE. It’s completely possible to both make a living in the real world and craft a creative and individualistic life for yourself in a dream world — side-by-side. Pragmatism and imagination are not enemies to each other, but natural partners in a kind of thinking that takes into account the fullness of what it means to be a human being. This is why I was never afraid to go out in the world and try to become a writer. When people asked me, “But how will you make a living?”, my answer was, “By having a job, of course.” I knew that writing didn’t have to pay my way in the world in order for it to become the most important thing in my life. What my parents taught me was that, as long as you are meeting your responsibilities in the real world, and keeping a roof over your head, what you do in your own time is nobody’s business but your own — and you can be just as wildly, independently free as your imagination and discipline will let you be.

Q: Your parents promoted your development as a self-sufficient, independent thinker. You didn’t have a TV in the house, you bound your own books, and you washed your hair in a rain barrel. How can parents raising kids today in today’s screen-oriented, couch-potato climate help their kids tap their creativity?

LG: I don’t have children myself, but a wise and creative

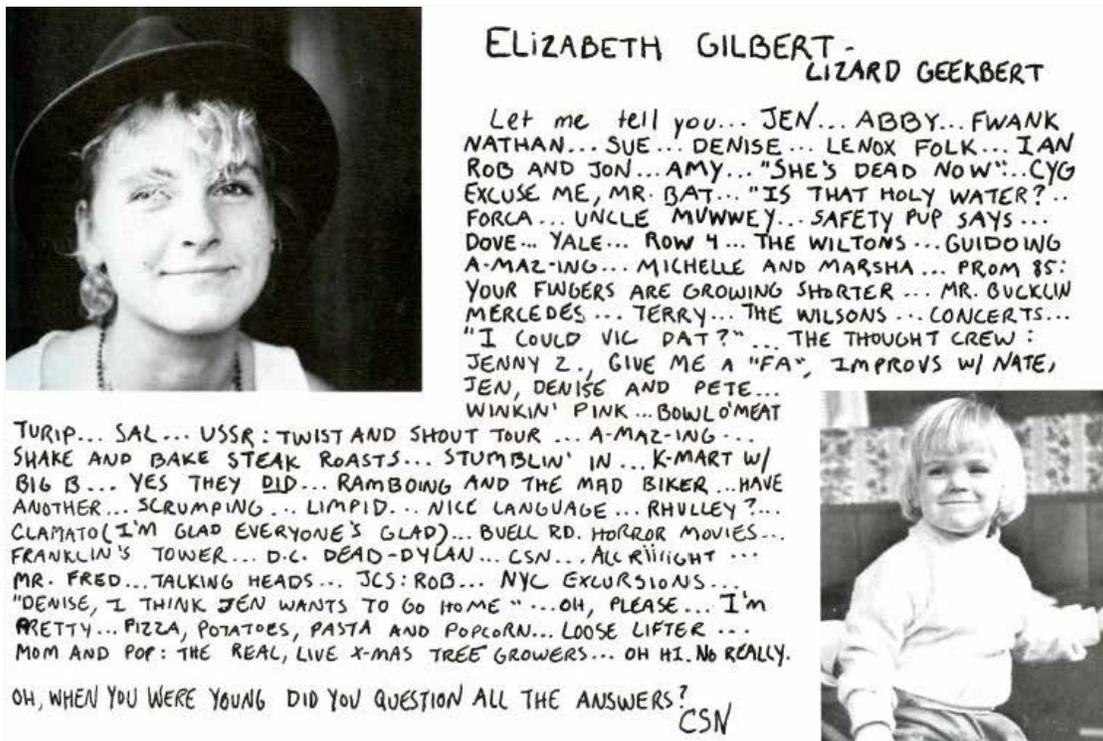
parent I know told me this, “Children will never listen to what you tell them, but they can’t help imitating what you show them.” Your children will most likely become, in other words, whatever you model to them. If you model couch-potato behavior to them, you will create future couch-potatoes. It doesn’t do much good to tell your kids that they aren’t allowed to spend their whole lives with their faces buried in an electronic screen, if you always have your own face buried in an electronic screen. It’s the same thing I feel when I see women worrying about their daughters’ body-image issues, but the mothers themselves are constantly dieting, constantly worrying about their own appearance, constantly comparing themselves against impossible ideals. Of course the daughters will see that, and imitate it...and this is how it spreads. If you want confident daughters, you have to show them what a confident woman looks like. If you want creative children, you have to show them what a creative adult looks like. My sister and I both became makers because our parents were makers. So the bigger question to me is not, “How do we help children tap into their creativity?”, but “How do we help adults tap into their creativity?” If the adults are doing it, the children will follow – whatever it is. They won’t be able to help themselves, except to follow.

B: A favorite book from your childhood, a 1784

edition of Captain Cook’s Voyages Round the World, inspired your novel, *The Signature of All Things*. Why was Cook’s book so magical to you? In an era of e-books, does a home library filled with hardcover books have a role?

LG: I read e-books myself (as a traveler, it’s HEAVEN not to have to pack a suitcase full of hardcover volumes) but there really is nothing like the magic of a gorgeous old book. I was lucky enough to grow up in a house with a lot of them. My great-grandfather had been an amateur book collector (he was constantly broke or in debt, but at least he always had books!) and that 1784 collection of Captain Cook was one volume that we inherited. It was the most valuable object in our house, always kept on a high shelf, away from little hands. So of course, my sister and I were constantly sneaking glimpses at it, the way a child would naturally do with any forbidden object. It was a fascinating book – full of incredible 18th century drawings of maps, strange plants, and aboriginal people. We couldn’t stay away from it. So of course, forty years later, I ended up writing a novel that begins with Cook’s voyages ... it all circles around eventually.

B: You’ve mastered many forms of communication, from Twitter and Podcasts to TED talks and old-school novel writing. There’s



CLASS OF 1987: Gilbert’s Litchfield High School yearbook write-up reveals an inquiring mind. Courtesy of Oliver Wolcott Library, Litchfield

a special place in your heart for your Facebook community, who you thank in your new book, *Big Magic*. Tell us about your Facebook forum.

LG: I resisted social media for a long time, because I tend to be a “last adapter” of all new technologies. It’s not that I’m a snob about these things, but that I just feel like a dummy, when I don’t understand how things work. But about three years ago, I was finally convinced by my publisher to start a Facebook page, and it has honestly become one of the most important touchstones of my life. I’d had this misconception that social media was a place of bullying and dumbed-down conversations, but that’s only true if you make it true. (After all, the Internet is nothing but US, writ large.) What I discovered on my Facebook page was a gathering of sensitive, intelligent readers – mostly women – who wanted to talk about real things, day after day. I’ve fallen in love with that community, and it’s a big part of my life now to ponder quite seriously every day the question, “What should we discuss right now?” One of my favorite things is to get a conversation going about some real-world, challenging emotional or social issue, and then see how the conversation blossoms throughout the day on Facebook, as more and more voices chime in – adding wisdom, perspective, and grace from all over the world. It’s beautiful, and it’s a means of communication that never could have occurred even ten years ago. I’m honored to be part of it.

 In *Big Magic*, you present the idea that a gifted person is not a genius, but has a genius – “a guardian deity....the conduit of your inspiration.” How does one know where their genius is speaking to them?

LG: I think our geniuses speak to us through our curiosity. Curiosity is such an underrated virtue, especially in a society that has made a fetish out of more grandiose words, like “passion” and “certainty”. Curiosity is a quieter impulse. If passion is the great burning tower of flame on the mountaintop, curiosity is a tiny tap on the shoulder, gently asking you to turn your head a quarter of an inch and look a wee bit closer at some almost-invisible thing that has caught your attention. It’s so easy to ignore these tiny impulses – especially when you are searching for passion or certainty – but I believe that the creative journeys almost always begin with such miniature hints. It’s a whisper; not a great booming voice like Charlton Heston’s. For me, my sacred commitment to creativity means never ignoring those tiny hints, and to trust that – no matter how strange and random – my curiosity is always trying to tell me something, always trying to communicate the next move.

 It’s been 10 years since the publication of *Eat Pray Love*. Do you plan to mark the anniversary in any particular way?

LG: Funnily enough, I am answering these questions on the exact day [February 16] of the anniversary of publication! And I’m doing it in the back of a car that’s traveling across Tasmania. I’ve been in Australia for the last month, and I’ve been seeing all sorts of amazing corners of this part of the world that I’ve never seen before. So I guess you could say that I’m honoring the anniversary by continuing the journey – by still seeking out new adventures. But the really cool (and more public) tribute is what my publisher is doing to honor the anniversary. They’re publishing a wonderful new anthology called EAT PRAY LOVE MADE ME DO IT, in which people all over the world shared their stories about what EAT PRAY LOVE inspired them to change about their lives. The book will be published in March, and I can’t wait for it. It was such a moving experience to read those essays, and to see the impact that my book had on people’s own senses of what might be possible for transformation in their own lives.

 You’ve traveled all over the world – any places you haven’t been to yet that you want to visit?

LG: It seems like the more I travel, the bigger the world becomes – in other words, the more places it seems I HAVEN’T seen. Next up on the list are Wales, Scotland, South Africa, Iceland, Japan...oh, the list will never end!

 In spring, what kind of plants are you most thrilled to see sprout in your garden at home in Frenchtown, NJ?

LG: There’s nothing like the glimpse of the first snowdrops to make you feel like winter has, once again, been survived.

 In this issue, we’re running a story about second acts. If you decided to stop writing for whatever reason, what would you do instead?

LG: Can a person make a career somehow out of karaoke? If so, that’s my next move.

For tickets to “Creative Artists: An Evening with Storytellers, Creators and Entertainers” on May 13 at the Connecticut Forum, go to www.ctforum.org. The event will begin at 8 p.m. at The Bushnell. For more about Liz Gilbert, go to www.elizabethgilbert.com. 

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