

from Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear
(2015) by Elizabeth Gilbert

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

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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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

Please understand that the only reason I can speak so authoritatively about fear is that I know it so intimately. I know every inch of fear, from head to toe. I've been a frightened person my entire life. I was born terrified. I'm not exaggerating; you can ask anyone in my family, and they'll confirm that, yes, I was an exceptionally freaked-out child. My earliest memories are of fear, as are pretty much all the memories that come after my earliest memories.

Growing up, I was afraid not only of all the commonly recognized and legitimate childhood dangers (the dark, strangers, the deep end of the swimming pool), but I was also afraid of an extensive list of completely benign things (snow, perfectly nice babysitters, cars, playgrounds, stairs, *Sesame Street*, the telephone, board games, the grocery store, sharp blades of grass, any new situation whatsoever, anything that dared to move, etc., etc., etc.).

I was a sensitive and easily traumatized creature who would fall into fits of weeping at any disturbance in her force field. My father, exasperated, used to call me Pitiful

Pearl. We went to the Delaware shore one summer when I was eight years old, and the ocean upset me so much that I tried to get my parents to *stop all the people on the beach from going into the surf*. (I just would've felt a lot more comfortable if everyone had stayed safely on his or her own towel, quietly reading; was that too much to ask?) If I'd had my way, I would have spent that entire vacation—indeed, my entire childhood—indoors, snuggled on my mother's lap, in low light, preferably with a cool washcloth on my forehead.

This is a horrible thing to say, but here goes: I probably would've *loved* having one of those awful Munchausen-syndrome-by-proxy mothers, who could have colluded with me in pretending that I was eternally sick, weak, and dying. I would have totally cooperated with that kind of mother in creating a completely helpless child, given half the chance.

But I didn't get that kind of mother.

Not even close.

Instead, I got a mother who wasn't having it. She wasn't having a minute of my drama, which is probably the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. My mom grew up on a farm in Minnesota, the proud product of tough Scandinavian immigrants, and she was not about to raise a little candy-ass. Not on her watch. My mother had a plan for turning around my fear that was almost comic in its straightforward-

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wardness: At every turn, she made me do exactly what I dreaded most.

Scared of the ocean? Get in that ocean!

Affraid of the snow? Time to go shovel snow!

Can't answer the telephone? You are now officially in charge of answering the telephone in this house!

Hers was not a sophisticated strategy, but it was consistent. Trust me, I resisted her. I cried and sulked and deliberately failed. I refused to thrive. I lagged behind, limping and trembling. I would do almost anything to prove that I was emotionally and physically totally enfeebled.

To which my mom was, like, "No, you aren't."

I spent years pushing back against my mother's unshakable faith in my strength and abilities. Then one day, somewhere in adolescence, I finally realized that this was a really weird battle for me to be fighting. Defending my weakness? That's seriously the hill I wanted to die on?

As the saying goes: "Argue for your limitations and you get to keep them."

Why would I want to keep my limitations?

I didn't, as it turned out.

I don't want you keeping yours, either.

Fear Is Boring

Over the years, I've often wondered what finally made me stop playing the role of Pitiful Pearl, almost overnight. Surely there were many factors involved in that evolution (the tough-mom factor, the growing-up factor), but mostly I think it was just this: I finally realized that my fear was boring.

Mind you, my fear had always been boring to everybody else, but it wasn't until mid-adolescence that it became, at last, boring even to me. My fear became boring to me, I believe, for the same reason that fame became boring to Jack Gilbert: *because it was the same thing every day.*

Around the age of fifteen, I somehow figured out that my fear had no variety to it, no depth, no substance, no texture. I noticed that my fear never changed, never delighted, never offered a surprise twist or an unexpected ending. My fear was a song with only one note—only one word, actually—and that word was "STOP!" My fear never had anything more interesting or subtle to offer than that one emphatic word, repeated at full volume on an endless loop: "STOP, STOP, STOP, STOP!"

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Which means that my fear always made predictably boring decisions, like a choose-your-own-ending book that always had the same ending: *nothingness*.

I also realized that my fear was boring because it was identical to everyone else's fear. I figured out that everyone's song of fear has exactly that same tedious lyric: "STOP, STOP, STOP, STOP!" True, the volume may vary from person to person, but the song itself never changes, because all of us humans were equipped with the same basic fear package when we were being knitted in our mothers' wombs. And not just humans: If you pass your hand over a petri dish containing a tadpole, the tadpole will flinch beneath your shadow. That tadpole cannot write poetry, and it cannot sing, and it will never know love or jealousy or triumph, and it has a brain the size of a punctuation mark, but it damn sure knows how to be afraid of the unknown.

Well, so do I.

So do we all. But there's nothing particularly compelling about that. Do you see what I mean? You don't get any special *credit*, is what I'm saying, for knowing how to be afraid of the unknown. Fear is a deeply ancient instinct, in other words, and an evolutionarily vital one . . . but it ain't especially smart.

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For the entirety of my young and skittish life, I had fixated upon my fear as if it were the most interesting thing about me, when actually it was the most mundane. In fact, my fear was probably the only 100 percent mundane thing about me. I had creativity within me that was original; I had a personality within me that was original; I had dreams and perspectives and aspirations within me that were original. But my fear was not original in the least. My fear wasn't some kind of rare artisanal object; it was just a mass-produced item, available on the shelves of any generic box store.

And that's the thing I wanted to build my entire identity around?

The most boring instinct I possessed?

The panic reflex of my dumbest inner tadpole?

No.

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The Fear You Need and the Fear You Don't Need

Now you probably think I'm going to tell you that you must become fearless in order to live a more creative life. But I'm not going to tell you that, because I don't happen to believe it's true. Creativity is a path for the brave, yes, but it is not a path for the *fearless*, and it's important to recognize the distinction.

Bravery means doing something scary.

Fearlessness means not even understanding what the word *scary* means.

If your goal in life is to become fearless, then I believe you're already on the wrong path, because the only truly fearless people I've ever met were straight-up sociopaths and a few exceptionally reckless three-year-olds—and those aren't good role models for anyone.

The truth is, you need your fear, for obvious reasons of basic survival. Evolution did well to install a fear reflex within you, because if you didn't have any fear, you would lead a short, crazy, stupid life. You would walk into traffic. You would drift off into the woods and be eaten by bears.

You would jump into giant waves off the coast of Hawaii, despite being a poor swimmer. You would marry a guy who said on the first date, "I don't necessarily believe people were designed by nature to be monogamous."

So, yes, you absolutely do need your fear, in order to protect you from actual dangers like the ones I've listed above.

But you do not need your fear in the realm of creative expression.

Seriously, you don't.

Just because you don't *need* your fear when it comes to creativity, of course, doesn't mean your fear won't show up. Trust me, your fear will always show up—especially when you're trying to be inventive or innovative. Your fear will always be triggered by your creativity, because creativity asks you to enter into realms of uncertain outcome, and fear *hates* uncertain outcome. Your fear—programmed by evolution to be hypervigilant and insanely overprotective—will always assume that any uncertain outcome is destined to end in a bloody, horrible death. Basically, your fear is like a mall cop who thinks he's a Navy SEAL: He hasn't slept in days, he's all hopped up on Red Bull, and he's liable to shoot at his own shadow in an absurd effort to keep everyone "safe."

This is all totally natural and human.
It's absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.

It is, however, something that very much needs to be dealt with.

The Road Trip

Here's how I've learned to deal with my fear: I made a decision a long time ago that if I want creativity in my life—and I do—then I will have to make space for fear, too.

Plenty of space.

I decided that I would need to build an expansive enough interior life that my fear and my creativity could peacefully coexist, since it appeared that they would always be together. In fact, it seems to me that my fear and my creativity are basically conjoined twins—as evidenced by the fact that creativity cannot take a single step forward without fear marching right alongside it. Fear and creativity shared a womb, they were born at the same time, and they still share some vital organs. This is why we have to be careful of how we handle our fear—because I've noticed that when people try to kill off their fear, they often end up inadvertently murdering their creativity in the process.

So I don't try to kill off my fear. I don't go to war against it. Instead, I make all that space for it. Heaps of space. Every single day. I'm making space for fear right this moment. I allow my fear to live and breathe and stretch out its legs comfortably. It seems to me that the less I fight my fear, the less it fights back. If I can relax, fear relaxes, too. In fact, I cordially invite fear to come along with me everywhere I go. I even have a welcoming speech prepared for fear, which I deliver right before embarking upon any new project or big adventure.

It goes something like this:

"Dearest Fear: Creativity and I are about to go on a road trip together. I understand you'll be joining us, because you always do. I acknowledge that you believe you have an important job to do in my life, and that you take your job seriously. Apparently your job is to induce complete panic whenever I'm about to do anything interesting—and, may I say, you are *superb* at your job. So by all means, keep doing your job, if you feel you must. But I will also be doing my job on this road trip, which is to work hard and stay focused. And Creativity will be doing its job, which is to remain stimulating and inspiring. There's plenty of room in this vehicle for all of us, so make yourself at home, but understand this: *Creativity and I are the only ones who will be*

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making any decisions along the way. I recognize and respect that you are part of this family, and so I will never exclude you from our activities, but still—your suggestions will never be followed. You're allowed to have a seat, and you're allowed to have a voice, but you are not allowed to have a vote. You're not allowed to touch the road maps; you're not allowed to suggest detours; you're not allowed to fiddle with the temperature. Dude, you're not even allowed to touch the *radio*. But above all else, my dear old familiar friend, you are absolutely forbidden to drive."

Then we head off together—me and creativity and fear—side by side by side forever, advancing once more into the terrifying but marvelous terrain of unknown outcome.

Why It's Worth It

It isn't always comfortable or easy—carrying your fear around with you on your great and ambitious road trip, I mean—but it's always worth it, because if you can't learn to travel comfortably alongside your fear, then you'll never be able to go anywhere interesting or do anything interesting.

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And that would be a pity, because your life is short and rare and amazing and miraculous, and you want to do really interesting things and make really interesting things while you're still here. I know that's what you want for yourself, because that's what I want for myself, too.

It's what we all want.

And you have treasures hidden within you—extraordinary treasures—and so do I, and so does everyone around us. And bringing those treasures to light takes work and faith and focus and courage and hours of devotion, and the clock is ticking, and the world is spinning, and we simply do not have time anymore to think so small.