



## Meaning Making

### Lived Experience of Elizabeth Gilbert

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#### Abstract

This essay is about Elizabeth Gilbert's pursuit to find a connection to something greater than herself, for happiness and balance after a life changing event in her life. It is based on her book "Eat and pray Love" is a biography of her encounters, as she searches for herself. It is a brief overview as she embarks on a mission for solitude, truth, harmony, unity and meaning in life through Italy, India, and Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Education, Analysis, Literature

In our darkest moments, following many paths and adversities, we all attempt to make some sense of the world around us and our involvement in it. Through lived experience, explains from Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir's show her personal search for conviction and meaning and her hunt to make sense of her life, after a dark moment that left her questioning purpose. I have been there, as I believe have we all, where we are left questioning the purpose of, or reasoning behind, an occurrence resulting in an attempt to find an answer to or relationship with ourselves while, possibly, connecting us to something greater than oneself.

Elizabeth Gilbert wrote many books, articles, diaries and journals that narrate her life journey and pursuits to find wholeness and an entity greater than one. She is best known, however, for her 2006 memoir "Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia" which recaptures her journey around the world, looking for consolation after a difficult divorce. Her books were often international bestsellers, and *Eat, Pray, Love* is a wonderful work of art that was made into a marvelous romantic movie and why I selected it for my essay choice. In her book, based on her worldview and lived reality, she adventured on an excursion, and the central theme of *Eat Pray Love*, as well as most of her work, is the search for understanding, worth and her significance of life. On our pathway toward self-actualization, one directive, as it was for Gilbert, maybe to bridge and balance our moral, social and physical self in relation to meaning, and/or our spiritual self.

Elizabeth Gilbert, at one point, thought she had a complete and perfect modern dream life with a husband, country house in New York, topped off by a successful career. Her life takes a turn and she becomes depressed and confused as well as conflicted with what is/was important to *her*. It can be said that "a Spiritual journey entails an inevitable confrontation between the real self and the ideal self, with the self sometimes being seen [as a] spiritual disappointment of failure (Gould, 2009)." A sad and heartbreaking event made her enquire her purpose and ponder her significance. She set out in search for peace, guidance, experience and solitude, as she traveled across the world to experience different cultures.

Gilbert breaks out of her comfort zone to embark on a quest of self-discovery, as illustrated in her book. Left in the shadows of a painful and unbearable divorce, Gilbert fell into depression. Eventually, she set off on a yearlong pursuit to discover more about whom *she* is and to fill the void in her life, and find balance between her mind, body and soul. This chase, which takes her through Italy, India and the Indonesian island of Bali, was only the beginning of her spiritual quest, but meaningful enough to stir transformation from within. She was tired of living how others say she "should" live and do what others expected of her to do and therefore felt time to live for *her* and challenged herself to be open for change.

The central theme of her work in *Eat Pray Love* was to find balance and meaning in the presence of spirituality, which is shown in her desire to take apart in daily ritual and prayer, learn the way of the people in Bali, go into silence to prove her devotion and live in harmony amongst the people of the villages. The book, as well as the movie replicates her yearlong journey, after her separation. During which, she struggled along the way to find faith, confidence and her inner essence, as she searched for healing and a relationship with an entity or higher power greater than herself. A spiritual connection provides a sense of control over ones environment, as spirituality is said to stimulate hope and a sense of optimism, provide purpose and answers to what life is about, offer support at desperate times of need and question, as well as promote living a better physically and mentally healthy lifestyle (Gould, 2009).

At the beginning of her voyage or quest to becoming spiritual, Gilbert arrived in Rome with her mind set on self-repair and healing, by immersing herself in her own philosophy of pleasure. In which, for her, was to let her own needs to be at the forefront of her luxuriating trip. Initially, she thought this would be her cure-all only to discover that it was not enough. And, that she wanted far more and yearned for something bigger than her, to help become grounded and whole. She talked a lot about a sense of wholeness that unified not only her inner self but a connection to a divine part in order to be complete. This was no easy task, for Gilbert, as it is not for many, because an entity or inner spirit is not something we can see, hear or measure with science, but come to our own terms that there is something bigger than humankind and accept that it may not be tangible.

Shortly after, in India, Gilbert learns the healing power of meditation as a medicine or remedy for the soul. Until the use of silence she did not appreciate it, but Gilbert continued to remain open for new discovery, which encouraged her to learn new things about herself and others. You can see her struggle in her search, as she fell asleep during meditation, and worse, silent prayer. She eventually learns to appreciate this type of treatment as part of cleansing. Amongst all those she encounters, she meets a man who, like her, was running from realities in his own world that left him in much sorrow, which he went to India to fill a painful void through a spiritual uplifting and rehabilitation. He tells her to clear out all the space in her mind and the universe will rush in, which is what she discovered she had to do, given her racing thoughts, all her fears and self-condemnation. Her encounters only help to validate that she was on the right path toward psychological well-being through spirituality.

Eventually, arriving in Indonesia, Gilbert surpassed the heartache, turmoil and grief of her divorce, only to come to realization she has the strength from within to control her reactions to events in her life. She learns to enjoy the simple pleasures in life as she spends endless days with a Yoda looking medicine man that she learns much wisdom from, a healer who gives her great insight and a man who she eventually falls in love with. Gilbert found amity through encounters with these individuals and many others, and, she also spent much time trying out Hindu spirituality in India in search for balance and peace, bicycling around Bali and much introspection with meditation. It was in Bali that her inner healing process began and she truly found herself, as she learned commitment to living a balanced life with pleasure, dedication and most importantly by not giving up thy self.

During Gilbert's escape plan from pain: "to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India, and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two" (Gilbert 2006) she becomes restored. Gilbert, as the title suggests, takes enjoyment in the simple desires of eating, endless prayer, and once again learns to love, which, initially after her divorce she felt she would not let happen again, as she said it would disrupt her "balance". Nevertheless she found that all of these simple pleasures moved her spirit (soul) and, therefore, I say, aid in her process to developing spiritual meaning, in which connecting her real self with her ideal self. Personal meaning must be created from within, as Victor Frankl explains, "humans possess an innate will to generate meaning" (Gould, 2006), Where a individual must discover their own path of personal fulfillment, just as Elizabeth Gilbert did on her road to discovery.

Along Gilbert's journey, the medicine man plays an important role in her healing and discovery, which he hands her a prophecy and tells her to follow it and she will find what she is looking for. "Spirituality, in its ultimate sense, must involve going beyond ordinary or personal limits. Transcendence demands surpassing or exceeding what has been clarified farther reaches of human development. Within this discovery, the spiritual self must become comfortable with the unknown, but proceed nevertheless in the face of uncertainty" (Gould, 2006). This task tested Gilbert's faith, as well as challenged her to exceed the mysterious and tread in unknown territory. While doing so; she found peace and balance within herself. Through knowledge and endless encounters with the medicine man, Gilbert learned that balance requires not too much spirituality and not too much self, but a bit of both, and that loving someone does not mean she has to give up balance, but is a part of the sharing and giving to be balanced.

Going briefly back to the life changing events of her divorce, in 2010, Gilbert printed and published an addition to *Eat Pray Love* titled *Comment* which was a memoir exploring her ambivalent feelings about marriage and the institution for which it is founded upon. *Committed* (2010) continues to depict Gilbert's confusion with life and purpose, as she writes about her trials and tribulations through her process of creating meaning and finding steadiness prior to falling into the institution of marriage, as well as after a hard divorce. In *Committed*, you can witness her controversy and fear of marriage as she deeply explored what marriage is all about historically. She questioned the aspects of fidelity, traditions, divorce, and responsibility and most importantly the social expectations of matrimony. Granted the expectations regarding the "traditional" way of living it was only natural for Gilbert to feel lost or convicted after a divorce.

Following her divorce, Gilbert swore never to remarry, but she did indeed find love again, fairly quicker than she expected. While in Indonesia, as illustrated in *Eat Pray Love*, Gilbert fell in love with a man named Felipe. While both being survivors of previous divorces they vowed to never remarry, but stay committed, hence the title of her book, which is, an extension of *Eat Pray Love*. Gilbert talked about marriage being a forced stimulation on love, even though this force is greater than she projected. For, as fate takes its course, Felipe, being a non-citizen, was stopped at the American border, so needless to say and despite her previous feelings and vow Gilbert and Felipe, forcefully, tied the knot. Life is what it is, but Gilbert found her faith in a spiritual world and discovered that she has the power to create change, as well as has the ability to control her reactions to those changes.

As there is no, one, definition of spirituality, there are many who attempt over the years to define it as; Maslow in 1971 states the ultimate level of human spirituality encompasses the appreciation for "beauty, truth, unity, and the sacred", while, Benner says in 1991 that spirituality is a function of one's "awareness of, and striving for, transcendence,

surrender, integration, and identity,” meanwhile, Cervantes and Ramirez in 1992 described spirituality as “the quest for meaning and mission in life, the search for harmony and wholeness in the universe, and a belief in an all-loving presence” (in Gould, 2009). With this being said, there is no question that Gilbert’s mission was a transcending experience toward creating meaning and balance within *her*, regardless of, whether she searched for the presence of a higher being. Taking a leap of faith, Gilbert’s journey toward discovery, peace and balance is what we all search for with spirituality or lack thereof, only to find whatever it is we are in search for, is, usually thyself, or for better words the real self and the ideal self in totality.

To step outside your own being can shine the light on, or guide an individual toward a direction one has not taken before, in which could lead to finding oneself or answer an unsolved question. As Gilbert explains in her diaries, through debates, conversations, and involvement in the rituals and devotion that others hold she benefitted through a wakefulness, which lead to her becoming well-centered and have faith, as well as love again. In similarity, regarding C.S.Lewis in his struggle to find God he created or found a relationship with a divine power through endless conversations and debates (the guides) that raised attention (the light) which altered his perspectives. All of this to show that through experience we can alter our perception about life, in which many individuals may need to feel valued, centered and whole.

Gilbert’s entire trip, fueled by an ugly separation, which could have ended her faith to go on, lead her to love, wealth and fame, where she now continues to write memoirs, and stays in the spot lite. She spoke a lot about finding balance between herself and a higher power in her biographies. Gilbert did a great job explaining her quest for balance in the spiritual life, as illustrated in her work, specifically *Eat Pray Love*. As Gilbert did, I have gone on a vacation outside the reality of responsibilities and current situations, although only for a week, to experience life for something opposed to how I lived, to be able to, open up and see life from Others’ lenses or philosophies. They say life is as we know it. At times, if possible, it is a great remedy to witness others’ deas, values and beliefs in order to be mindful, have empathy and be truly aware, as Gilbert explains she set out to accomplish. Divorce, as other life changing events, has a way of making people question life, believe that they are doing something wrong, failed at some point or unworthy of love, in which it was obvious in Gilbert’s struggle.

When I first read *Eat Pray Love* I did not understand her quest or the reason behind her wanting to stay in an old temple or village, away from modern technology, but then, years later, I watched the movie once, twice and a third time while it all started to come together, nonetheless, make sense. Her quest to finding or creating meaning and belief in a higher entity has been similar to my lifelong pursuit to finding love, happiness, acceptance and wholeness in an ever-changing atmosphere. I do not think I ever put as much thought in to *Eat Pray Love* until this essay and my ability to become more open-minded and accepting of others worldviews and beliefs, as well as expeditions to get there. I commend Elizabeth Gilbert for her brave journey, as well as sharing her view with the world, for those in despair need to find ones inner self and balance between the mind, body soul and possibly an entity bigger than one’s self.

Upon re-viewing *Eat, Pray, Love* and analyzing it, specifically, for Elizabeth Gilbert’s worldview and quest to discover *her* and create meaning in *her* personal life I learned to identify the role of spirituality as a means to healing, as well as create meaning in human development. It not only made me self-reflect on my own voyage and spiritual growth but also helped facilitate my personal growth, individually and professionally. Though, I am continuously searching for meaning in relation to spirituality or lack thereof. Our class, *Spirituality and Meaning-Making* and Gilbert’s journey through spiritual growth has already helped me to appreciate the diversity of individual’s experiences toward meaning – making, the process of diverse plights and the role spirituality and religion plays in this development of the self.

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