



Big Magic

Creative Living Beyond Fear

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"All you need to do is to follow your passion, and everything will be fine." I think this can be an unhelpful and even cruel suggestion at times.

First of all, it can be an unnecessary piece of advice, because if someone has a clear passion, odds are they're already following it and they don't need anyone to tell them to pursue it. (That's kind of the definition of a passion, after all: an interest that you chase obsessively, almost because you have no choice.) But a lot of people don't know exactly what their passion is, or they may have multiple passions, or they may be going through a midlife change of passion—all of which can leave them feeling confused and blocked and insecure.

If you don't have a clear passion and somebody blithely tells you to go follow your passion, I think you have the right to give that person the middle finger. Because that's like somebody telling you that all you need in order to lose weight is to be thin, or all you need in order to have a great sex life is to be multiorgasmic: *That doesn't help!*

I'm generally a pretty passionate person myself, but not every single day. Sometimes I have no idea where my passion has gone off to. I don't always feel actively inspired, nor do I always feel certain about what to do next.

But I don't sit around waiting for passion to strike me. I

keep working steadily, because I believe it is our privilege as humans to keep making things for as long as we live, and because I enjoy making things. Most of all, I keep working because I trust that creativity is always trying to find me, even when I have lost sight of it.

So how do you find the inspiration to work when your passion has flagged?

This is where curiosity comes in.

Devotion to Inquisitiveness

I believe that curiosity is the secret. Curiosity is the truth and the way of creative living. Curiosity is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Furthermore, curiosity is accessible to everyone. Passion can seem intimidatingly out of reach at times—a distant tower of flame, accessible only to geniuses and to those who are specially touched by God. But curiosity is a milder, quieter, more welcoming, and more democratic entity. The stakes of curiosity are also far lower than the stakes of passion. Passion

makes you get divorced and sell all your possessions and shave your head and move to Nepal. Curiosity doesn't ask nearly so much of you.

In fact, curiosity only ever asks one simple question: "Is there *anything* you're interested in?"

Anything?

Even a tiny bit?

No matter how mundane or small?

The answer need not set your life on fire, or make you quit your job, or force you to change your religion, or send you into a fugue state; it just has to capture your attention for a moment. But in that moment, if you can pause and identify even *one tiny speck* of interest in something, then curiosity will ask you to turn your head a quarter of an inch and look at the thing a wee bit closer.

Do it.

It's a clue. It might seem like nothing, but it's a clue. Follow that clue. Trust it. See where curiosity will lead you next. Then follow the next clue, and the next, and the next. Remember, it doesn't have to be a voice in the desert; it's just a harmless little scavenger hunt. Following that scavenger hunt of curiosity can lead you to amazing, unexpected places. It may even eventually lead you to your passion—albeit through a strange, untraceable passageway of back alleys, underground caves, and secret doors.

Or it may lead you nowhere.

You might spend your whole life following your curiosity and have absolutely nothing to show for it at the end—except one thing. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you passed your entire existence in devotion to the noble human virtue of inquisitiveness.

And that should be more than enough for anyone to say that they lived a rich and splendid life.

The Scavenger Hunt

Let me give you an example of where the scavenger hunt of curiosity can lead you.

I've already told you the story of the greatest novel I never wrote—that book about the Amazon jungle, which I neglected to nurture, and which eventually jumped out of my consciousness and into Ann Patchett's consciousness. *That* book had been a passion project. That idea had come to me in a brain wave of physical and emotional excitement and inspiration. But then I got distracted by life's exigencies, and I didn't work on that book, and it left me.

So it goes, and so it went.

After that Amazon jungle idea was gone, I didn't have

another brain wave of physical and emotional excitement and inspiration right away. I kept waiting for a big idea to arrive, and I kept announcing to the universe that I was ready for a big idea to arrive, but no big ideas arrived. There were no goose bumps, no hairs standing up on the back of my neck, no butterflies in my stomach. There was no miracle. It was like Saint Paul rode his horse all the way to Damascus and nothing happened, except maybe it rained a bit.

Most days, this is what life is like.

I poked about for a while in my everyday chores—writing e-mails, shopping for socks, resolving small emergencies, sending out birthday cards. I took care of the orderly business of life. As time ticked by and an impassioned idea still had not ignited me, I didn't panic. Instead, I did what I have done so many times before: I turned my attention away from passion and toward curiosity.

I asked myself, *Is there anything you're interested in right now, Liz?*

Anything?

Even a tiny bit?

No matter how mundane or small?

It turned out there was: gardening.

(I know, I know—contain your excitement, everyone! *Gardening!*)

I had recently moved to a small town in rural New Jersey. I'd bought an old house that came with a nice backyard. Now I wanted to plant a garden in that backyard.

This impulse surprised me. I'd grown up with a garden—a huge garden, which my mother had managed efficiently—but I'd never been much interested in it. As a lazy child, I'd worked quite hard *not* to learn anything about gardening, despite my mother's best efforts to teach me. I had never been a creature of the soil. I didn't love country life back when I was a kid (I found farm chores boring, difficult, and sticky) and I had never sought it out as an adult. An aversion to the hard work of country living is exactly why I'd gone off to live in New York City, and also why I'd become a traveler—because I didn't want to be any kind of farmer. But now I'd moved to a town even smaller than the town in which I'd grown up, and now I wanted a garden.

I didn't *desperately* want a garden, understand. I wasn't prepared to die for a garden, or anything. I just thought a garden would be nice.

Curious.

The whim was small enough that I could have ignored it. It barely had a pulse. But I didn't ignore it. Instead, I followed that small clue of curiosity and I planted some things.

As I did so, I realized that I knew more about this gardening business than I thought I knew. Apparently, I had accidentally learned some stuff from my mother back when I was a kid, despite my very best efforts not to. It was satisfying, to uncover this dormant knowledge. I planted some more things. I recalled some more childhood memories. I thought more about my mother, my grandmother, my long ancestry of women who worked the earth. It was nice.

As the season passed, I found myself seeing my backyard with different eyes. What I was raising no longer looked like my mother's garden; it was starting to look like my own garden. For instance, unlike my mom, a masterful vegetable gardener, I wasn't all that interested in vegetables. Rather, I longed for the brightest, showiest flowers I could get my hands on. Furthermore, I discovered that I didn't want to merely cultivate these plants; I also wanted to know stuff about them. Specifically, I wanted to know where they had come from.

Those heirloom irises that ornamented my yard, for instance—what was their origin? I did exactly one minute of research on the Internet and learned that my irises were not indigenous to New Jersey; they had, in fact, originated in Syria.

That was kind of cool to discover.

Then I did some more research. The lilacs that grew around my property were apparently descendants of similar bushes that had once bloomed in Turkey. My tulips also originated in Turkey—though there'd been a lot of interfering Dutchmen, it turned out, between those original wild Turkish tulips and my domesticated, fancy varieties. My dogwood was local. My forsythia wasn't, though; that came from Japan. My wisteria was also rather far from home; an English sea captain had brought the stuff over to Europe from China, and then British settlers had brought it to the New World—and rather recently, actually.

I started running background checks on every single plant in my garden. I took notes on what I was learning. My curiosity grew. What intrigued me, I realized, was not so much my garden itself, but the botanical history behind it—a wild and little-known tale of trade and adventure and global intrigue.

That could be a book, right?

Maybe?

I kept following the trail of curiosity. I elected to trust completely in my fascination. I elected to believe that I was interested in all this botanical trivia for a good reason. Accordingly, portents and coincidences began to appear before me, all related to this newfound interest in botanical history. I stumbled upon the right books, the right people, the

right opportunities. For instance: The expert whose advice I needed to seek about the history of mosses lived—it turned out—only a few minutes from my grandfather's house in rural upstate New York. And a two-hundred-year-old book that I had inherited from my great-grandfather held the key I'd been searching for—a vivid historic character, worthy of embellishing into a novel.

It was all right in front of me.

Then I started to go a little crazy with it.

My search for more information about botanical exploration eventually led me around the planet—from my backyard in New Jersey to the horticultural libraries of England; from the horticultural libraries of England to the medieval pharmaceutical gardens of Holland; from the medieval pharmaceutical gardens of Holland to the moss-covered caves of French Polynesia.

Three years of research and travel and investigation later, I finally sat down to begin writing *The Signature of All Things*—a novel about a fictional family of nineteenth-century botanical explorers.

It was a novel I never saw coming. It had started with nearly *nothing*. I did not leap into that book with my hair on fire; I inched toward it, clue by clue. But by the time I looked up from my scavenger hunt and began to write, I was completely consumed with passion about nineteenth-

century botanical exploration. Three years earlier, I had never even *heard* of nineteenth-century botanical exploration—all I'd wanted was a modest garden in my backyard!—but now I was writing a massive story about plants, and science, and evolution, and abolition, and love, and loss, and one woman's journey into intellectual transcendence.

So it worked. But it only worked because I said *yes* to every single tiny clue of curiosity that I had noticed around me.

That's Big Magic, too, you see.

It's Big Magic on a quieter scale, and on a slower scale, but make no mistake about it—it's still Big Magic.

You just have to learn how to trust it.

It's all about the *yes*.

That's Interesting

The creators who most inspire me, then, are not necessarily the most passionate, but the most curious.

Curiosity is what keeps you working steadily, while hotter emotions may come and go. I like that Joyce Carol Oates writes a new novel every three minutes—and on such a

wide range of subjects—because so many things seem to fascinate her. I like that James Franco takes whatever acting job he wants (serious drama one minute, campy comedy the next) because he recognizes that it doesn't all have to earn him an Oscar nomination—and I like that, between acting gigs, he also pursues his interests in art, fashion, academia, and writing. (Is his extracurricular creativity any good? *I don't care!* I just like that the dude does whatever he wants.) I like that Bruce Springsteen doesn't merely create epic stadium anthems, but also once wrote an entire album based on a John Steinbeck novel. I like that Picasso messed around with ceramics.

I once heard the director Mike Nichols speak about his prolific film career, and he said that he'd always been really interested in his failures. Whenever he saw one of them airing on late-night TV, he would sit down and watch it all over again—something that he never did with his successes. He would watch with curiosity, thinking, *That's so interesting, how that scene didn't work out...*

No shame, no despair—just a sense that it's all very interesting. Like: Isn't it funny how sometimes things work and other times they don't? Sometimes I think that the difference between a tormented creative life and a tranquil creative life is nothing more than the difference between the word *awful* and the word *interesting*.

Interesting outcomes, after all, are just awful outcomes with the volume of drama turned way down.

I think a lot of people quit pursuing creative lives because they're scared of the word *interesting*. My favorite meditation teacher, Pema Chödrön, once said that the biggest problem she sees with people's meditation practice is that they quit just when things are starting to get interesting. Which is to say, they quit as soon as things aren't easy anymore, as soon as it gets painful, or boring, or agitating. They quit as soon as they see something in their minds that scares them or hurts them. So they miss the good part, the wild part, the transformative part—the part when you push past the difficulty and enter into some raw new unexplored universe within yourself.

And maybe it's like that with every important aspect of your life. Whatever it is you are pursuing, whatever it is you are seeking, whatever it is you are creating, be careful not to quit too soon. As my friend Pastor Rob Bell warns: "Don't rush through the experiences and circumstances that have the most capacity to transform you."

Don't let go of your courage the moment things stop being easy or rewarding.

Because that moment?

That's the moment when *interesting* begins.

Hungry Ghosts

You will fail.

It sucks, and I hate to say it, but it's true. You will take creative risks, and often they will not pan out. I once threw away an entire completed book because it didn't work. I diligently finished the thing, but it really didn't work, so I ended up throwing it away. (I don't know why it didn't work! How can I know? What am I, a book coroner? I have no certificate for the cause of death. *The thing just didn't work!*)

It makes me sad when I fail. It disappoints me. Disappointment can make me feel disgusted with myself, or surly toward others. By this point in my life, though, I've learned how to navigate my own disappointment without plummeting too far into death spirals of shame, rage, or inertia. That's because, by this point in my life, I have come to understand what part of me is suffering when I fail: It's just my ego.

It's that simple.

Now, I've got nothing against egos, broadly speaking. We all have one. (Some of us might even have *two*.) Just as you need your fear for basic human survival, you also need

TRUST

your ego to provide you with the fundamental outlines of selfhood—to help you proclaim your individuality, define your desires, understand your preferences, and defend your borders. Your ego, simply put, is what makes you who you are. Without one, you're nothing but an amorphous blob. Therefore, as the sociologist and author Martha Beck says of the ego, "Don't leave home without it."

But do not let your ego totally run the show, or it will shut down the show. Your ego is a wonderful servant, but it's a terrible master—because the only thing your ego ever wants is reward, reward, and more reward. And since there's never enough reward to satisfy, your ego will always be disappointed. Left unmanaged, that kind of disappointment will rot you from the inside out. An unchecked ego is what the Buddhists call "a hungry ghost"—forever famished, eternally howling with need and greed.

Some version of that hunger dwells within all of us. We all have that lunatic presence, living deep within our guts, that refuses to ever be satisfied with anything. I have it, you have it, we all have it. My saving grace is this, though: *I know that I am not only an ego; I am also a soul.* And I know that my soul doesn't care a whit about reward or failure. My soul is not guided by dreams of praise or fears of criticism. My soul doesn't even have language for such notions. My soul, when I tend to it, is a far more expansive

and fascinating source of guidance than my ego will ever be, because my soul desires only one thing: *wonder*. And since creativity is my most efficient pathway to wonder, I take refuge there, and it feeds my soul, and it quiets the hungry ghost—thereby saving me from the most dangerous aspect of myself.

So whenever that brittle voice of dissatisfaction emerges within me, I can say, “Ah, my ego! There you are, old friend!” It’s the same thing when I’m being criticized and I notice myself reacting with outrage, heartache, or defensiveness. It’s just my ego, flaring up and testing its power. In such circumstances, I have learned to watch my heated emotions carefully, but I try not to take them too seriously, because I know that it’s merely my ego that has been wounded—never my soul. It is merely my ego that wants revenge, or to win the biggest prize. It is merely my ego that wants to start a Twitter war against a hater, or to sulk at an insult, or to quit in righteous indignation because I didn’t get the outcome I wanted.

At such times, I can always steady my life once more by returning to my soul. I ask it, “And what is it that *you* want, dear one?”

The answer is always the same: “More wonder, please.”

As long as I’m still moving in that direction—toward wonder—then I know I will always be fine in my soul,

which is where it counts. And since creativity is still the most effective way for me to access wonder, I choose *it*. I choose to block out all the external (and internal) noise and distractions, and to come home again and again to creativity. Because without that source of wonder, I know that I am doomed. Without it, I will forever wander the world in a state of bottomless dissatisfaction—nothing but a howling ghost, trapped in a body made of slowly deteriorating meat.

And that ain’t gonna do it for me, I’m afraid.

Do Something Else

So how do you shake off failure and shame in order to keep living a creative life?

First of all, forgive yourself. If you made something and it didn’t work out, let it go. Remember that you’re nothing but a beginner—even if you’ve been working on your craft for fifty years. We are all just beginners here, and we shall all die beginners. So let it go. Forget about the last project, and go searching with an open heart for the next one. Back when I was a writer for *GQ* magazine, my editor in chief, Art Cooper, once read an article I’d been working on for

five months (an in-depth travel story about Serbian politics that had cost the magazine a small fortune, by the way), and he came back to me an hour later with this response: "This is no good, and it will never be any good. You don't have the capacity to write this story, as it turns out. I don't want you to waste another minute on this thing. Move on to the next assignment immediately, please."

Which was rather shocking and abrupt, but, holy cow—talk about *efficiency*!

Dutifully, I moved on.

Next, next, next—always next.

Keep moving, keep going.

Whatever you do, try not to dwell too long on your failures. You don't need to conduct autopsies on your disasters. You don't need to know what anything means. Remember: The gods of creativity are not obliged to explain anything to us. Own your disappointment, acknowledge it for what it is, and move on. Chop up that failure and use it for bait to try to catch another project. Someday it might all make sense to you—why you needed to go through this botched-up mess in order to land in a better place. Or maybe it will never make sense.

So be it.

Move on, anyhow.

Whatever else happens, stay busy. (I always lean on this

wise advice, from the seventeenth-century English scholar Robert Burton, on how to survive melancholy: "Be not solitary, be not idle.") Find something to do—*anything*, even a different sort of creative work altogether—just to take your mind off your anxiety and pressure. Once, when I was struggling with a book, I signed up for a drawing class, just to open up some other kind of creative channel within my mind. I can't draw very well, but that didn't matter; the important thing was that I was staying in communication with artistry at some level. I was fiddling with my own dials, trying to reach inspiration in any way possible. Eventually, after enough drawing, the writing began to flow again.

Einstein called this tactic "combinatory play"—the act of opening up one mental channel by dabbling in another. This is why he would often play the violin when he was having difficulty solving a mathematical puzzle; after a few hours of sonatas, he could usually find the answer he needed.

Part of the trick of combinatory play, I think, is that it quiets your ego and your fears by lowering the stakes. I once had a friend who was a gifted baseball player as a young man, but he lost his nerve and his game fell apart. So he quit baseball and took up soccer for a year. He wasn't the greatest soccer player, but he liked it, and it didn't break

his spirit so much when he failed, because his ego knew this truth: "Hey, I never claimed it was my game." What mattered is only that he was doing *something* physical, in order to bring himself back into his own skin, in order to get out of his own head, and in order to reclaim some sense of bodily ease. Anyhow, it was fun. After a year of kicking around a soccer ball for laughs, he went back to baseball, and suddenly he could play again—better and more lightly than ever.

In other words: If you can't do what you long to do, go do something else.

Go walk the dog, go pick up every bit of trash on the street outside your home, go walk the dog again, go bake a peach cobbler, go paint some pebbles with brightly colored nail polish and put them in a pile. You might think it's procrastination, but—with the right intention—it isn't; it's motion. And any motion whatsoever beats inertia, because inspiration will always be drawn to motion.

So wave your arms around. Make something. Do something. Do *anything*.

Call attention to yourself with some sort of creative action, and—most of all—*trust* that if you make enough of a glorious commotion, eventually inspiration will find its way home to you again.

Paint Your Bicycle

The Australian writer, poet, and critic Clive James has a perfect story about how once, during a particularly awful creative dry spell, he got tricked back to work.

After an enormous failure (a play that he wrote for the London stage, which not only bombed critically, but also ruined his family financially and cost him several dear friends), James fell into a dark morass of depression and shame. After the play closed, he did nothing but sit on the couch and stare at the wall, mortified and humiliated, while his wife somehow held the family together. He couldn't imagine how he would get up the courage to write anything else ever again.

After a long spell of this funk, however, James's young daughters finally interrupted his grieving process with a request for a mundane favor. They asked him if he would please do something to make their shabby old secondhand bicycles look a bit nicer. Dutifully (but not joyfully), James obeyed. He hauled himself up off the couch and took on the project.

First, he carefully painted the girls' bikes in vivid shades