

A CONVERSATION WITH ELIZABETH GILBERT

Q: When we last encountered you, you had just concluded your journey across Italy, India and Indonesia in *Eat, Pray, Love*. At the end of that story you fell in love with a man in Bali named Felipe. It is that very relationship that led you to write this new book, *COMMITTED*. Can you give us some background—why did you want to write this book?

A: As any author can tell you, there are books that you want to write, and books that you need to write and **COMMITTED** definitely falls in the latter category. Because the United States Department of Homeland Security got involved in my love story with Felipe, the stakes and terms of our relationship changed overnight. Suddenly the two of us—two very marriage-averse divorce survivors—had been basically “sentenced to wed” by the government. I was hoping to make peace with those new terms—to essentially study my way through the history of marriage until I could find a way to be OK with the fact that I was entering that institution again, and the best way I know how to really get granular and intimate with a subject is to write a book about it.

Q: Why do you think U.S. divorce rates are so high? What statistical findings did you encounter that people might consider before tying the knot?

A: First of all, it’s important to know that the famous “50% divorce rate” that we hear about so much these days is a little bit misleading. Across the board, there is a 50% divorce rate, true, but those numbers really change based on the age of the couple at the time of marriage. Young couples divorce at astronomically high rates, which blows the curve for everyone else. The fundamental conclusion we can draw from all the data is this: Marriage is not a game for the young. Wait as long as you humanly can to get married, and your odds of staying with one partner forever will increase dramatically. If you wait until you are, say, 35 years old to get married, your odds of success are pretty terrific. The other question is one of expectation. Modern Americans bring to their marriages the most over-stuffed bundle of expectations the institution has ever seen. We expect that our partner will not merely be a decent person, but will also be our soul mate, our best friend, our intellectual companion, our greatest sexual partner and our life’s complete inspiration. Nobody in human history has ever asked this much of a companion. It’s a lot to ask of one mere mortal, and the inevitable disappointments that follow such giant expectations can cripple marriages.

Q: In the book, you state that same-sex marriage may very well save the institution of marriage. How so?

A: Marriage is on the decline everywhere, and same-sex couples are the only ones who are really passionate about matrimony anymore. As one commentator described the situation, it’s as if the institution of marriage is a crumbling, decaying, old neighborhood where nobody wants to live anymore. But then—in come the gay couples, begging to move into that neighborhood, buy up all that valueless real estate, renovate those old houses, bring creative new shops and galleries to the place and suddenly make it the coolest place to live again. After which, heterosexual couples and families will follow! So the argument becomes this—instead of trying to “save” the institution of marriage by excluding gay couples from matrimony, maybe it’s smarter to try to rescue marriage by letting same-sex couples move in and gentrify the place. It’s a cute argument, but it has a strong historic resonance—every few generations, marriage opens its doors a little

wider and lets in a new population who had previous been excluded, and that breathes new life into the whole institution.

Q: The film version of *Eat, Pray, Love* starring Julia Roberts as you and Javier Bardem as Felipe is coming out later this year. How does it feel knowing your life is being made into a movie?

A: It's great. Everyone involved with this movie is passionate about the book, and they're all working really hard to try to make the movie as loyal to the original story as possible, which is really touching. (They didn't have to care so much, so I'm moved by their passion.) There is something surreal about the whole experience, but then again, there has been something surreal about *Eat Pray Love* from the beginning. I have never entirely understood the rocket-like trajectory of that book, and so—with the movie as with all of it—I stand back, amazed, watching it all unfold and wondering at this strange turn of destiny.

Q. Which myths about marriage, either personal or cultural, were most difficult for you to dispel in writing and researching this book?

A. I don't think I went into this project overburdened with dewy-eyed romantic myths about marriage (my divorce had pretty much wiped those out years ago), but I did carry an instinctive prejudice that marriage is an artificial construct of "society," invented as a tool of repression by states and religions. In truth, the story is far more complicated than that. In fact, it wasn't states or religions that invented the notion of marriage, but individuals and families, who wanted to create some sort of special protective bond that would be recognized and respected by everyone in the community, within private intimacy could be tasted. What shocked and amazed me was to discover, in fact, how vehemently repressive governments and institutions (Soviet Russia, for instance, or the early Christian church) battled against marriage, trying in the most idealistic phases of their evolution to break down the natural bonds of love and family in order to exert more control over the populace. Seen in such light, marriage starts to look appealing and subversive to me—but, of course, I lean that way, and so of course I would find that exciting.

Q: Since the publication and enormous success of *Eat, Pray, Love*, you have become something of a public figure. With **COMMITTED, once again we find you able to write honestly and openly about your personal life. Is it hard to write so intimately knowing that this new book will have a very large audience?**

A: I don't think I will ever write another book as raw, intimate and revealing as *Eat, Pray, Love*, which I wrote without imagining that millions of people would ever read it. While **COMMITTED** is also written in a familiar-enough memoir structure, it is far less personal, and much more a meditation, or a contemplation, on a vast historical subject. I use myself and Felipe as sort of stand-ins for the readers, who, I suspect, probably have similar questions and hesitations about their own marriages and relationships, but I actually don't feel very exposed or revealed by this story. If anything, I think Felipe and I are pretty representative modern lovers, and our story—with the exception of the dramatic encounter with the Homeland Security Department—is not that different from everyone else's story.

Q: Did your matrimonial research bring you a greater understanding of whether or not marriage was appropriate for you, or did it bring you greater confusion?

A: Well, it's kind of a moot point because I really had no choice: If I wanted to keep a relationship with my sweetheart and if I really wanted to live with him in America, I absolutely had to get married, or else I would lose him. So the decision was, in effect, already made. What I was trying to do was find a way to feel OK about it, and this book definitely helped. My fear was that the more I learned about marriage, the more I would hate it, but the opposite happened: The more I learned about marriage, the more I respected it. And when I use the word "respect" here, what I mean is something almost on the Darwinian level. I came to respect that this thing still exists, despite centuries and centuries of change and, yes, evolution. What I learned about marriage is that it will take any shape, adapt to any circumstances, in order to endure. And that is precisely because *we seem to want it and need it*. Our longing for legally-recognized private intimacy means that we will keep reforming and shaping this thing, generation after generation, in order to somehow make it our own. And I found that idea very touching, very transformative. I, too, am part of the history of marriage—as we all are, and all need to be.

Q. The notion of “tiny acts of household tolerance” is a beautiful and spiritual way of thinking about partnership. In your own life, how does your spirituality intersect with marriage?

A. *Everything* I have ever learned about life—spiritual and otherwise—helps me to do better within this marriage than I have in past relationships. I think this is part of the reason that marriage is so ill-advised for young people: With rare exception, most twenty-two year olds simply haven't been sanded down or humbled enough by life's experiences yet to have acquired the wisdom and perspective that make long-term human intimacy possible. But yes, certainly the lessons of a sincere spiritual quest have been awfully helpful in negotiating the challenges of running a household—with the most important lesson of all being that I am, at the end of every day, responsible for my own state of being. I doubt that there is a more important tool of cheerful companionship than that truth.

Q: In the chapter “Marriage and History,” you point out that Christians believe marriage to be a sacred union. Where does this belief stem from and can marriage really be deemed a sacred union?

A: Just to be clear—Christian leadership decided that marriage was a sacred union only very recently. The early Christian fathers demonstrated a serious aversion to marriage, believing instead that the only truly sacred state of being was lifelong celibacy and fellowship (in imitation of Christ and the angels.) For the first thousand or so years of Christian history, the church did not concern itself with the business of marriage at all, because marriage was not seen as a sacrament (as opposed to baptism, say, which was always a sacrament); instead, marriage was considered a worldly and secular affair, that had everything to do with sex and property and taxes and women, and nothing to do with the higher concerns of divinity. That changed in the year 1215 AD, when the Catholic church officially took over the marriage business, as a means of exerting greater control over the unions and divorces of European royalty. And since then, Christian leadership has embraced marriage and preached marriage and now is even “defending” marriage. But all that Christian reverence toward marriage is very recent—certainly in contrast to, say, Judaism, where marriage has been considered a noble union for thousands of years (although even in ancient Hebrew society, the union was never considered inviolably sacred: there was always provision for divorce.) I am not saying that marriage shouldn't be seen as holy or sacred, but I object when those words are used as weapons against individuals within something that should be a private union, and that is almost invariably a complicated one.

Q: In an effort to be sure you and Felipe were making the right decision, you went as far as making a list of your own faults so that he could better understand what he would be getting into if you married. What makes your relationship with Felipe so honest and successful?

A: Well, we've only been married two and a half years at this point, so it's a little early to be using the word "successful," but as for the honest part—that's simple: I have learned from painful personal experience that anything short of honesty will end in catastrophe for everyone.

Q: Marriage and children seem to go hand-in-hand, and as someone who was not interested in having children, you looked to your mother and grandmother for answers. What surprised you about their experience with having children?

A: I am a woman of an entirely new generation than both my mother and grandmother and I have options they never knew. (Which is to say: I have options, period.) My grandmother had 7 children, essentially because she had no choice or control whatsoever over her biology, and she struggled with poverty and exhaustion her whole life. My mother had two children, both of whom she chose, but she also made enormous sacrifices for her kids—including quitting a career that she dearly loved, in order to stay home and raise us, on account of the realization that she could not, in fact, do it all. (As one female friend of mine always says, "Just because you can do anything doesn't mean you can do everything.") The question of having children was a huge one in my life—my first marriage fell apart largely, though not entirely, because of this question—and I have chosen to remain childless, which is a decision that reflects my own life, my own desires, my own destiny. Still, I found it important to talk to both my mother and my grandmother about their choices, in order to put my decision in a deeper perspective. Probably the most surprising moment was when my grandmother told me that—while she loved her children and felt the happiest moments of her life during motherhood—she prayed that I would never have children of my own, and would instead dedicate my life to writing books and traveling. There was something very tender and touching in that revelation.

Q. As a sequel of sorts, COMMITTED follows up the fairytale romance of *Eat, Pray, Love* with some stark realities, including the bureaucratic proceedings of the Department of Homeland Security. Was it difficult, as an author, to switch gears and take on this less romantic subject matter?

A. I like to say that the difference in tone between *Eat, Pray, Love* and **COMMITTED** is the difference in tone between romance and marriage. *Eat, Pray, Love* is, in every way, a romantic story, full of escape and longing and sensual exploration and even the shimmering thrill of emotional imbalance. Such a tone was appropriate to that year of self-exploration, *because that's what it was like*. I was overcome during my *Eat, Pray, Love* journey by a sense of daring, of soaring possibility, and such expansion was exactly what I needed, in order to reinvigorate my life after a period of loss and sorrow. But I daresay that marriage demands of us a slightly more pragmatic temperament. And the events that precipitated **COMMITTED** were so especially serious (you could say that Felipe's and my romance ended the minute the men in the Homeland Security uniforms handcuffed him and led him away) that a sense of sobriety and level-headed focus was really called for in this situation, in order to handle things wisely. That same sense of sobriety and focus, I think, informs the overall tone of **COMMITTED**. It wasn't painful or limiting to write the book in such a manner; it just felt accurate and appropriate to both the subject and the situation. Anything else would have felt like a lark, which would not have benefitted anyone, least of all me.

Q: What is the “Western Style Problem” that your friend Ting expresses in the chapter “Marriage and Women”? Do you think marriage is more beneficial to men or women?

A: This is not my opinion, but a fact backed up by every conceivable study: Marriage is far, far more beneficial to men than women. Married men perform far better in life than single men, and are happier than single men, and live longer than single men, and earn more money than single men. Married women, on the other hand, make less money than single women, suffer more from depression than single women, don’t live as long as single women, and are more likely to be the victims of violence than single women. This has always been the case, which does fly in the face of the mythology and romanticizing of marriage that is epidemic in our culture. The “Western Style Problem” my friend Ting in Laos describes is the moment that women start deciding that they might want to delay or even defer marriage —understandable, given the facts—which tends to throw a wrench in the workings of traditional family structure. Social conservatives lament this, but maybe the bigger question needs to be, “How can we create family and marriage structures where women don’t lose so big?” Maybe if that were the question being confronted, more women might be interested in embracing marriage again.

Q. The traveling in exile across Southeast Asia you describe in COMMITTED is very different from the open-ended journeying of *Eat, Pray, Love*. For one thing, you were emotionally attached when you set out to write this book. How did that change your experience of traveling?

A. There’s a big difference between traveling because you want to, and traveling because you are not allowed to go home again. Felipe and I had many wonderful experiences when we were living out our period of immigration exile, but we could never forget for long that we were, in fact, forbidden to return home, and we had no idea when that period of exile would lift. That knowledge alone brought a keen sense of homesickness to me that I had never experienced before as a traveler, and it seems to have colored forever my feelings about travel. (I will never again cross a border carelessly, for one thing.) It’s also true that Felipe and I were in the early stages of a very sweet period of experimental domesticity when circumstances wrenched us out of our home, so that was painful, but also transformative. When we finally did return to America safely to settle down, we both felt a compulsion to really burrow in—which is exactly what we’ve done. For the first time in my life—living in a small town, with a lovely husband, in an old house with a big garden and several pets—I feel absolutely *rooted*, in a way I have never experienced before, and never would have imagined even desiring. But it is what we want—at least for now—and so we’re relishing that stability.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: A novel! It’s a great relief to begin inventing characters and plot again, after three serious non-fiction titles in a row