

Dear Students, Colleagues and Friends,

*“Most of all, though, he asked his students to be brave. Without bravery, he instructed, they would never be able to Realize the vaulting scope of their own capacities. Without bravery, they would never know the world as richly as it longs to be known. Without bravery, their lives would remain small – far smaller than they probably wanted their lives to be.”*  
*Elizabeth Gilbert, on Jack Gilbert in the book Big Magic*

I read those words and I thought of you. And me.

Ms. Gilbert describes this man’s life, this Jack Gilbert (no relation to her she’s quick to note); the fact he had something *in* him that wanted to get out. And, even though fame chased him, he cut it off like a gangrenous arm. He recognized it got in the way of his poetry – of his receiving and putting down on paper the right words, the right phrases. He simply but bravely chose a path away from it.

What is even more confounding (for I think, many of us) is the fact he continued to eschew fame in favor of giving what was inside of him and what could be inside of him the chance to get OUT. He was *brave*.

We, at least in the Western world, are pretty loosey-goosey with our favorite terms and phrases. We spit them out into the world with rapidity and disregard for their gravity. Bravery is one of those words. Jack Gilbert was a teacher; and it could be that bravery was one of the greatest gifts, not that he gave, but that he pulled out of his students when they would let him. He pulled out the word with intention and great regard and hoped they would receive and use it.

As she wrote about this, I experienced one of those moments when everything went blank around me. My poor husband was talking and I couldn’t hear the words. I pushed my lazy hound off my lap and came here because I knew I *had* to tell you this story – and just a little more – because *this is so important*.

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I’ve always had some kind of relationship to bravery. I was a tomboy; not one of the graceful gazelles with tumbling blonde hair and tinkling laughter. Bravery was a coping skill that allowed me to stand out, whether jumping on a horse bareback, playing rugby or mountain biking. But it wasn’t until I was teaching and writing that I really realized the true value and scariness of bravery.

I had gone to Wildbranch Writing Workshop and was excited to study under my top pick of mentors, Chip Blake of *Orion Magazine*. I’m not as well-read as a lot of writers even though when you note famous books I end up thinking, “Yeah, I’ve read that.” But most of them don’t stick in my head well enough for cocktail conversation. The point being, that I didn’t recognize some of the other mentors by name as I should have; but this guy knew the business of writing. I wanted to make what I sent to you all more digestible and pick up some tips for the biomimicry book I was working on then and now. So, what this businessman and writer might have to say felt very important. I needed to know the how to’s, the wherefores, the hardcore details of the business of writing.

At any rate, we all arrived in Vermont in one of their few real heat waves and spent mornings in our wooden classrooms, each with classic New England views. He assigned various work, taught lessons that I *still* use and repeat to others (always giving credit) – all excellent stuff. But one day he invoked the same word as Ms. Gilbert does in her book and Mr. Gilbert did before her in life. Courage. We were editing each other’s work and he admonished us to *have the courage to accept edits*. Well at the time, not claiming to be a writer in the first place, this seemed to be the oddest sort of advice I’d ever heard. This wasn’t about the business of writing. How could courage have any relationship to editing? Of course, to a very left-brained, Type-A person, I’m sure you can appreciate why I was a bit stumped – until we actually started editing.

I was up in my dorm room later that night, going over my teammates’ editing of my work and struggling with what they were suggesting when I remembered Chip’s words. I was so conflicted about it. It took away some of my connection to the piece, didn’t it? They couldn’t know just what I meant. Errrrg. I thought about it again. “Be brave. Accept edits.” I pushed *Accept edits*.

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As most of you know, I'm writing a book on biomimicry and how to apply it in the business world. Although I've been published now in a couple of magazines and a number of online magazines, I still don't consider myself "a writer", more of a teacher hoping writing will carry lessons further than my physical self can reach.

I conducted a number of interviews in 2015 with a score or so of brilliant business people utilizing biomimicry in their work. I kept moving along, working on chapters, following whatever rules I learned about writing and the business of writing along the way, gratefully accepting the edits of Gavin, Sara, Kim and other fine folks in my writing groups, even connecting with a publisher interested in the concept. Going great guns.

At the same time, all of this was moving along across a harsh landscape in which:

I got a fair concussion in the Fall,  
Had my favorite cat die shortly after,  
My house burn in the spring,  
My sister's husband develop terminal cancer in early summer and  
My other sister's husband have a stroke quite recently.

Now, saying all this I have to tell you I have led a very fortunate life to date – very fortunate indeed. But, as all these things were happening I kept pushing forward, pushing the writing, pushing on the book, pushing the contractors, pushing my sisters (in whatever way was required at the time). Pushing.

And then I read Ms. Gilbert's story – about this man who, instead of doing what we've all been taught when the door to fame opens – passed through the room and exited out the other side. He knew what he needed and wanted to do and used his bravery to do it.

I'm setting the biomimicry book aside until after the holidays. I'm caring for myself. I'm caring for my family. I'm rebuilding my house. Yes, I have fear about ceasing to push - of taking a hiatus from the book for three months. They are mostly irrational fears – that someone will come up with the same idea for the book, that I will become irrelevant, that the publisher will no longer be interested – but at this particular point in the journey it's what I need to do. I need to be brave.

Moving forward in life – I mean, really moving forward – requires more than learning the facts, more than doing the work, seeking the collaborations, positioning oneself, Tweeting clever thoughts and carrying on stimulating conversation. I thought immediately of those of you who are my students (and really even those of you who are not) and thought, "God, I have to tell them." I didn't say it enough in class, but intend to from here forward - Bravery. Courage. The ability to take steps that might make little or no sense to anyone but you. The ability to accept love and help from others even as you hesitate to do so. The ability to take the leap even if you don't have all the experience you think you need. The ability to turn your back on what society whispers you're supposed to do. Leave something. Start something.

Be brave.

*I hope you all are well and \*for your sake, please consider reading [Big Magic](#) by Elizabeth Gilbert.\**

Here's to you and courage too,

Margo Farnsworth

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***Give good people good information and they'll do good things.***

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