

A Yogini's Encounter with Elizabeth Gilbert - By Michele Cempaka

“Quiet on the set, Action, Rolling”, were the words shouted repeatedly on the not so glamorous set at Ketut Liyer's house in Pengosekan. I was called in as an extra and was patiently waiting along with four others, to be filmed in the movie version of Elizabeth Gilbert's book: *Eat Pray Love*. Of course I was pretty excited to get the call, and was even more elated to hear that we would be filmed in a scene with Julia Roberts (playing Elizabeth Gilbert), but alas, the director was temperamental and was reputed to change his mind in an instant. And that's exactly what he did. We were all unsanctimoniously cut out from the scene with beloved Julia. While my illustrious fate went down the tubes, it was quite a different story for a local yoga Diva – Ann Barros, who has become somewhat of a celebrity since her meeting with Elizabeth Gilbert back in 2002 during her yoga retreat.

“She was delightful – a great story teller. She had the ‘gift of gab’ as I like to call it. She was very gregarious and talkative. With a group of 10 women she had everybody laughing at her stories. She could imitate an Irish brogue at the drop of a hat,” Ann said smiling.

“The group got along well and everyone liked Liz, but I did notice that she was very preoccupied with her recent divorce. Immediately she started taking a consensus with everyone in the group as to how many people were divorced. It turned out that 8 out of 10 women had recently divorced. This created an instant camaraderie amongst the women. At that time for Liz, her divorce was all she could talk about. She wanted to do yoga because she felt that she was abusing herself. She was crying a lot, not taking care of her body and wasn't eating well, so part of the reason she chose a yoga retreat, was to do something good for herself. I don't know if she realized how preoccupied she was with her divorce. The group was very supportive of her... she had a lot of fun, camaraderie and yoga which all helped to open up her heart. I began to see some emotion which started to be released for Liz as there is sometimes in yoga poses.”

As part of the retreat, Ann Barros also offered an optional visit to see a Balinese healer. Gilbert jumped at this and called Ann on the phone before the trip to tell her that this was one thing that she definitely wanted to do. She also told Barros that the final payment for the trip would be paid by Allure magazine who was funding her trip. Gilbert had a contract with the magazine to write a story with a slant on beauty. The story was called: ‘Road to Rapture’, which appeared in the February 2003 issue of Allure. In her story she gives an entire account of the Yoga Bali tour she experienced from start to finish. This article was the precursor and perhaps the inspiration for Gilbert's book: *Eat Pray Love*.

After Gilbert arrived, Ann organized for her and three other women from the retreat to meet Ketut Liyer: one of the healers featured in Gilbert's book. All of the women were seeking answers to problems in their lives, so they went to Liyer for a reading and to receive a magical painting which he often does for his clients. Ann accompanied the four women including Gilbert, to help with interpreting, since Ketut Liyer only spoke a little English.

“I remember that evening very clearly, because we went after our afternoon yoga class which was around 6pm. We were at Liyer's house for hours and hours and hours; all these stories were unraveling and I was thinking that this was getting pretty personal, because they were trying to explain their issues which spanned from career problems to broken hearts. It turned out that the issues were more emotional than physical. Ketut Liyer couldn't understand everything that they were saying, so I would help to clarify some of the issues. Some of them broke into tears. When it was Liz's turn she was so emotional. She started crying and saying that she didn't feel that she was worth anything. She had a real break in her self-esteem caused by her recent divorce. She was so impressed with Liyer, that at the end of this long winded session of about 4 – 5 hours, she said that he'd helped her so much ... that she felt immediate relief and hope for the future, and that she wanted to come back and apprentice with him. Ketut Liyer looked at me and asked, “What does that mean, ‘apprentice’?” I explained to him that this means someone who is very adept and an expert in their field. He said, “Well, I can't do that.” I think he felt like he wasn't certified and he didn't have a degree, so he wasn't qualified to teach Gilbert. I really actually didn't believe her. I thought that she was so moved in the moment, but that she wouldn't really

go through with her plan.”

A year passed and Gilbert called Ann again in 2003, with news about her plans to take a year long trip. Ann remembers her saying that she wanted to explore all the aspects of ‘I’. Gilbert told her that she was planning to go to three countries that begin with ‘I’ – Italy, India & Indonesia. At first Elizabeth told her that she wanted to call the book: ‘Exploring all the Aspects of ‘I’, in Italy, India & Indonesia’. Anne didn’t think this was catchy enough, but she thought that Gilbert’s book project was a great idea.

Gilbert embarked on her year long journey in 2004 which started in Italy spending four months there where she gained 23 pounds. Then she went to India where she spent another four months in an Ashram learning how to quiet her mind. Finally, she ended her trip in Bali, where she met a Brazilian man whom she fell deeply in love with. Ann ran into her again walking down the street in Pengosekan that year. Gilbert was pleasantly surprised to see Ann and enthusiastically shared with her about the book she was working on and how she’d been spending time with Ketut Liyer. Ann was very surprised that Gilbert was so inspired to return to Bali and study with Ketut as she’d originally said she would do. On page 221 of Eat Pray Love, Gilbert meets with Ketut Liyer and says, “I don’t think you remember me, Ketut. I was here two years ago with an American Yoga teacher, a woman who lived in Bali for many years.” “He smiles, elated, “I know Ann Barros!

In 2007, after the paper back version of Eat Pray Love came out, Ann Barros’ yoga retreats really peaked. By this time, Ann had already opened Bali Yoga studio the year before, and she’d been receiving emails from many women from all over the world. They shared with her their impressions of Gilbert’s book and how they felt impelled to come to Bali and join Ann’s yoga retreat. Ann admits that there were many desperate individuals looking to recreate the transformational experiences that Gilbert elaborates about in her book. Many of the women also wanted to meet with Ketut Liyer, but Ann felt hesitant about taking them to see him.

Nowadays, Ann no longer accompanies her guests to visit Ketut Liyer, but is happy to arrange transport to his home for those who are interested in meeting with him to receive a reading or a magical painting. Back in the old days when Ketut first met Elizabeth Gilbert, his paintings sold for a mere Rp200.000, about \$20.00USD. Today the price has dramatically risen to Rp600.000 (approximately \$61.00USD). Ketut Liyer has a guest book which many of his clients have signed with lipstick kisses.

Ann has had her own unique journey which has been quite different then that of Gilbert’s. Her exploration of yoga began when she decided to become a professional dancer. At that time, she had a serious structural problem with her spine that occurred from an accident she’d had at the age of 13, when she dove into a pool and struck her head badly. This caused a fracture which later developed into scoliosis. She heard about Sri Iyengar and his use of props to correct physical problems such as hers, so she went to India to study with the master for several months. Her sole purpose was to fix her spine so she could pursue her ambitions to become a professional dancer. He used ropes, chairs and a variety of props to assist Ann with straightening her spine. She spent 20 minutes a day in a traction stretch which gradually helped correct her curvature. The results were so powerful for Ann, that she totally changed her career plans and decided to become an Iyengar yoga teacher instead. Through Ann’s personal experience with scoliosis, she has been able to teach many people how to practice yoga asanas to help them correct their own curvatures as well as assist them with other physical limitations like arthritis.

The yogini’s journey continues, and perhaps her path will cross once again with Elizabeth Gilbert, who is currently working on: *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*, soon to be released.

- Bali Advertsier, December 30, 2009