

Questions & Answers

1. What prompted you to write Gilbert?

Courageous Gilbert came to me in the middle of the night. It was the weekend after I had been away at a retreat type workshop working on personal issues. I had heard that as we remove the muck of our past, we begin to shine and our creative energy begins to flow. That is exactly what happened for me. I woke up, grabbed my laptop, and headed to my son's room as he was away at college. Normally, I would have gone back to sleep thinking, "Oh that was a nice dream." But this time was different. I knew I had to write it down or it would be gone. I wrote till dawn, and then realized I had not one client scheduled for the week. That had never happened. I saw that this was a sign to keep writing.

2. Why did you make the main character a groundhog?

That morning as I filled my teakettle with water, I glanced out my window to see an unusual creature walking in front of my house. We have squirrel, raccoons, fox, skunks, coyotes, beavers and deer. I asked my husband what it was, and he told me it was a groundhog. I had never seen a groundhog before. Right then and there it was a sign that he had to be my main character. Symbolically, groundhogs represent wisdom, grounding, digging for the truth. Groundhogs dig deep into the earth to make their homes. This symbolizes the need to go deep into our lives to find meaning and reveal our hidden truths.

3. What inspired the Old Oak Tree to become a character in your book?

Gilbert had to find someone neutral to talk with and learn from. Tree roots dig deep down into the earth for water and nourishment, their trunks are strong/solid and provide a grounding place to sit and relax, and their tall branches stretch up to the sky, connecting the heavens to the earth. The mighty oak tree is a symbol of courage and strength of character, and legend has it that it is the most powerful of all trees. I love this about trees. They are grounded and powerful, and spiritual. What better teacher for Gilbert? It took a long time to come up with just the right face—compassionate yet frank.

4. How do you bring together your own childhood experiences with writing for children today?

Being the sixth of ten children I became curious about people, how they behaved, and why they treated others the way they did. Imagine our household: ten kids, two parents, one dog, several cats, fish (always a fish or three), a rabbit and various other small pets. People always coming and going, meals to be made, laundry to start, homework to finish, and never ending dishes. At times it was fun, at times it was chaotic, at times it was loving, and at times it was overwhelming.

I sought refuge in nature. One of my favorite activities was climbing trees. We had what seemed to me a perfect maple tree right in front of our house. It had just the right placement of branches that with a little jump, I could pull myself up, hook my leg over the lowest branch, and begin my ascent. The higher I climbed the safer I felt. From that place, I could sing with the birds, spy on the neighbors, and feel hidden from the world. As a little girl, I thought my dad was my mighty oak. He was tall and powerful. Looking back I realized he was more angry than powerful. I was just a little girl, and honestly, he scared me. I decided to stay under the radar, out of the way, and definitely didn't speak my truth.

As an adult, I've learned that I need to speak my truth, speak up for myself to take care of myself. Otherwise, I will be 'bullied' into all kinds of things, like volunteering when I really have no time for myself and my own family, taking a job that I know will not feed my soul, and eating or drinking what I do not want.

So I wanted to write a book that would give children and adults tools to help them calm their anxious body, become aware that emotions are anywhere in their body, and learn a new way to express them. Once they develop a relationship with their emotions, they will be able to take care of themselves in a way I did not learn as a child.

5. If you were to meet up with the kid who bullied you in 4th grade at a class reunion, what would you say to him/her?

I would speak from my heart that I was a shy, young girl back then and that I felt scared and intimidated by the way she treated me. I would let her know that that was an important part of my childhood in showing me where I did not have a voice to speak up for myself. I would let her know I do not hold the experience against her because neither one of us was being our authentic selves.

6. What are strategies that parents, teachers, and other caregivers can use to help children understand and express their emotions?

1. Ask children what Gilbert is feeling by looking at his face, his body. Help them identify the emotion connected with the face and situation, and where that might be held in Gilbert's body.
2. Then ask the child, when is the last time you felt sad, scared, mad and where did you feel sad in your body? What does sad, scared, mad look like and sound like for you
3. Then practice deep breaths with long exhales, yelling into your hands to break up stuck energy, and rehearsing what to say to the bully. Practice together, often.

7. What are some of the feeling words children should learn to express? Other than the usual happy, sad, and mad.

Feeling words children should learn to express: happy, sad, mad—yes—but also afraid, lonely, jealous, frustrated, nervous, and embarrassed.

8. The breathing exercise is a centerpiece for Gilbert readers. Why is that so important?

Breathing is our connection to our heart. If we are afraid, we tend to either shallow breathe or hold our breath. This causes carbon dioxide to build up in our body, which then causes our heart to beat faster and our brain to get foggy. Our already anxious body then becomes even more anxious. When we practice deep breathing on a regular basis, it builds up a reservoir of calmness and clarity, so we respond vs react to life's challenges.

9. Are kids different then when you were growing up or do they face different struggles?

I do not feel that children today are that different, nor do they face entirely different struggles. Their world is different with instant communication and social media. However, the same issues of love, acceptance, and self-esteem still exist.

10. Are you working on a second book? What will that be?

My second book deals with getting triggered by others, being bullied and then being a bully. It teaches a grounding technique to connect with the authentic self and build self-empowerment. It also teaches about forgiveness.