

# LOAD, WATCH SHOOT



During a recent conversation, my good friend Murrell Smith told me about a movie he viewed with his wife, who is a clinical psychologist. The movie *Eat, Pray, Love* was based upon Elizabeth Gilbert's biographic memoir of the same title. The seemingly disconnected words in the title related to the three different countries Gilbert visited during a trip around the world in her quest for self-discovery. Most people weren't aware of the book or its author until 2010 when the story was released as a romantic drama starring Julia Roberts. The movie subsequently launched Gilbert's career as a best-selling author and self-help guru.

Murrell is a mindful shooter and lifelong learner, especially

about things that relate to shooting. While his wife was captivated by the romantic drama, Murrell was intrigued that the main character was focused intently on her experience at each location without any pre-conditions or expectations of a desired outcome. Murrell told me the three separate waypoints in the heroine's journey reminded him of the independent processes involved with shooting a muzzleloading flintlock rifle.

According to Murrell, loading the flintlock rifle is a meticulous and painstaking process that ultimately determines whether the gun will deliver a predictable shot. In fact, there are still numerous colloquial expressions in use today that relate to muzzleloaders: bite the bullet, keep your powder dry,

flash in the pan, shooting your wad, and fizzled-out. Performing the loading process correctly requires total concentration on the task at hand.

Watching the target takes on a whole new meaning when the loading process requires so much time. Frontiersmen developed considerable patience standing quietly in the woods while watching for whitetail deer and bear, which were staples of their diet. No prudent hunter hurried the watching process because impatience would only waste a shot at a target that wasn't within the range of his load.

The shooting process was also very deliberate, so the hunter often utilized a rock or tree limb to steady the rifle, which greatly improved the accuracy of the shot.

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Making adjustments for "Kentucky windage" was also part of the analytical process used by expert marksman to allow for wind and other factors that would influence the flight of the lead shot.

Although I wasn't motivated to purchase a muzzleloader, I found Murrell's "load, watch, shoot" discussion to be thought provoking. Fortunately, shooting clay targets with a contemporary shotgun is far less complicated than shooting a muzzleloading flintlock rifle. Nonetheless, I concluded the "Load, Watch, Shoot" process described by Murrell is relevant to a mindful approach to shooting clay targets with a shotgun.



## Carefully Mindful Shooters

As clay target shooters progress from shooting carefully to shooting mindfully their mental game becomes more important. Careful shooters tend to move the barrel of the shotgun into their central visual field very early in the shot sequence as they track the target. This blended focus allows for more time to analyze the lead picture before the target reaches the break zone. In fact, careful shooters prefer to rely more on a precise lead picture than firing the gun at a precise break point.

Mindful shooters look above and beyond the barrel of the shotgun so they can watch the target continuously with their central vision. This absolute focus seems to make the clay target appear larger and slower while the barrel of the shotgun magically finds the correct lead in the break zone.

Due to the greater distances between the flight path of the targets and the position of the station, successful sporting clays competitors tend to be carefully mindful shooters. They have mastered mental and visual discipline. These elite shooters are able to quiet their mind so they can concentrate on the task at hand, and control their vision to maintain

their visual depth of focus primarily on the clay target while keeping the barrel of the shotgun in their secondary visual field.

## A Method for the Magic

More than a year after the Eat, Pray, Love conversation with Murrell I was browsing on Amazon to download audible books for my drives between San Antonio and Chicago, when I noticed a book by Elizabeth Gilbert entitled, *Big Magic*. I was attracted to this book because the title of my second book was *A Method for the Magic*. While listening to Gilbert's semi-serious *Big Magic* narrative I discovered that we are kindred spirits.

Gilbert's message in *Big Magic* emphasized the need for writers and artists to live creatively to discover their hidden artistic talent. Similarly, I encouraged readers of my book to shoot intuitively so they could realize their hidden shooting potential. The common theme of these two books is that the right brain is responsible for functioning creatively and intuitively. Therefore, individuals must learn how to quiet their left brain so they can realize their hidden shooting potential.

The ability to shoot intuitively depends on the development of the shooter's watching and shooting reflexes. The watching reflex is controlled deliberately by the shooter's conscious mind, and the shooting reflex is managed automatically by the shooter's adaptive unconscious (subconscious mind). When a clay target shooter concentrates on watching the target continuously, and maintains the proper visual depth of focus in the break zone, the shotgun seems to fire automatically, and the target appears to break magically.

## Seize the Moment

Gilbert's message in her journey of self-discovery was to take trips to distant locations with the intention to just enjoy the experiences that arise each day. In this way the outcomes are merely the consequence of the experience. While teaching in the creative writing department at the University of Tennessee, Gilbert discovered books written by her predecessor, who encouraged readers to "risk delight." He wrote that it takes courage to seize the moment and to trust your hidden creativity.

My first book, *The Moment of Truth*, was divided into three sections: the vision to see, the faith

to believe, and the courage to do. This book was intended to help serious clay target shooters discover their Shooting Self. I believe it takes courage to pursue the journey of self-discovery that is necessary to shoot intuitively, and eventually realize your true shooting potential.

## Become a Trickster

During her discussion about creative living, Gilbert quoted radio personality Caroline Casey, who said, "Better a trickster than a martyr be." She described martyr energy as "dark, solemn, macho, hierarchical, fundamentalist, austere, unforgiving, and profoundly rigid." A martyr views life as a constant struggle.

Conversely, Gilbert described trickster energy as "light, sly, transgender, transgressive, animist, seditious, primal, and endlessly shape-shifting." A trickster views life as perpetually interesting. Hence, Gilbert believed the primal human impulse for creativity as a result of trickster energy.

Although the Trinity University shooting program involved serious training sessions, I believe the time I spent practicing trick shots actually helped me become a multi-time NSSA World Skeet Champion. I found traditional



practice sessions to be mundane so I challenged myself to shoot rounds of skeet with the shotgun held at my hip, behind my back, over my head and upside-down, and even between my legs while squatting. Trick shooting helped me realize that shooting clay targets successfully had more to do with vision and trust than precision and accuracy.

## Embrace Curiosity

Gilbert explained that a good trickster knows the secret of karma. Metaphorically, when a trickster throws his or her ball of creativity out into the universe, he or she trusts that ball will be thrown back in unexpected ways. The trickster just waits for the ball to return, catches it whenever it arrives, and throws it back out there again. Whereas the serious martyr feels vulnerable due to the unpredictability of the universe, the cheerful trickster enjoys the randomness because the trickster realizes it's all just a game.

In addition to being an avid clay target shooter, Brené Brown is a renowned sociologist and an expert on human vulnerability. In her more recent book, *Daring Greatly*, she described her

transition from the burdensome process of grinding out manuscripts using martyr energy to the magical process of writing lightly and cheerfully using trickster energy. When describing this new experience Brown commented that she had never written a book faster, better, or with such trust.

Gilbert proclaimed, "Curiosity is the truth and the way of creative living." Likewise, I believe curiosity is more important than passion for clay target shooters because it is tied to experiencing rather than performing. This is where fierce trust comes into the game.

## Fierce Trust

Innocent trust relates to a belief that a certain number of lessons and many hours of practice will lead to the attainment of a desired goal. According to Gilbert, fierce trust demands that you put forth the work regardless because you enjoy the effort, and the outcome doesn't matter. The basic tenant of fierce trust is that you are worthy regardless of the outcome. Gilbert concluded that the neat thing about fierce trust is that failure and success essentially become

irrelevant, because you love yourself more than you love your own ego.

Dr. Kent Keith's book entitled *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*, introduced the concept of finding meaning in the face of adversity. Keith first wrote his 10 paradoxical commandments as a 19-year-old college sophomore. According to Keith, there is a meaningful silver lining within every dark cloud of adversity if you choose to respond to it the right way.

Despite our efforts to achieve success in life, the outcomes we desire are often beyond our control. Nonetheless, we can control how we pursue success, and how we respond to each negative outcome regardless of how bad it makes us feel. My paradoxical commandment for clay target shooters is based upon my firm belief that how you are shooting is not as important as why you are shooting:

*Striving for improvement may not always lead to success in competition.*

*Strive to practice with a purpose anyway.*

## Load, Watch, Shoot

The purpose of this article is to remind clay target shooters to slow down as you prepare to enter each station. Devote your undivided attention to the simple ritual involved in each step in the process.

■ **Load** - Separate the process of loading the shotgun into two or three steps so your mind begins to think about just one thing in each moment. Think of this process as a pre-hypnotic suggestion

■ **Watch** - Settle your eyes in expanded soft focus at the eye hold to quiet the mind and heighten awareness. Be curious about watching where the target is going, see it, and then watch it continuously. Your watching reflex will tell your shooting reflex how to respond.

■ **Shoot** - Fire the shotgun as the target enters the intended break zone regardless of the perceived lead picture or how uncertain you feel. The twinge of uncertainty is the sign that your eyes are in absolute focus on the target. This is where fierce trust comes into the game.

Furthermore, the purpose of this article is to remind clay target shooters to approach each day with a goal to practice with a purpose. And remember that trickster energy is more conducive to having fun than martyr energy. ■

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